



ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to
become a librarian!

Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess Vol.7

Author: **Miya Kazuki**

Illustrator: **You Shiina**





The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of a library. Two characters with long blue hair and yellow eyes are the central focus. They are wearing white robes with gold and red accents. The character in the foreground is holding a large, ornate book. The library has high ceilings with arched windows and intricate golden railings. The lighting is warm and golden, with sparkling effects throughout the scene.

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Cast of Characters

Summary of Part Four:

At the Royal Academy, Rozemyne has become both a problem child and a top-ranking student. She took ownership of the library's magic tools through a blessing, played ditter against a greater duchy, advised royalty on matters of romance, defeated a Darkness feybeast, and healed the Ehrenfest gathering spot, among so many other things. Meanwhile, at the guidance of the Sovereign knight commander, who knows that Ferdinand is a seed of Adalgisa, the king orders Ferdinand to leave Ehrenfest and marry into another duchy. Now, Ferdinand must endure a new life in Ahrensbach.



Wilfried

Sylvester's son, Rozemyne's older brother, and a fourth-year.



Rozemyne

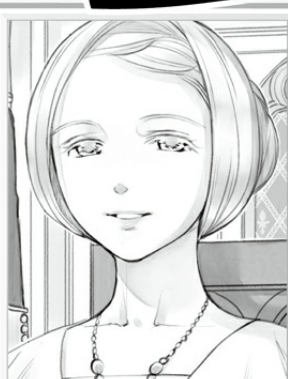
The protagonist. She grew a little and now looks about nine, but she's the same on the inside and will do anything to read books. A fourth-year.

Ehrenfest's Archducal Family



Sylvester

The archduke of Ehrenfest. He adopted Rozemyne, making him her adoptive father.



Florencia

Sylvester's wife and the mother of his three children. Rozemyne's adoptive mother.



Charlotte

Sylvester's daughter, Rozemyne's little sister, and a third-year.

Melchior

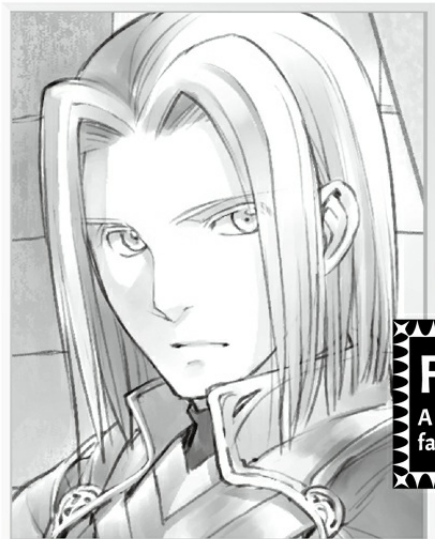
Sylvester's son. Rozemyne's little brother.

Bonifatius

Sylvester's uncle, Karstedt's father, and Rozemyne's grandfather.

Ferdinand

A member of the Ehrenfest archducal family. Sent to Ahrensbach by royal decree.



Rozemyne's Retainers



Ottilie

Head attendant.
Hartmut's mother.



Lieseleta

Angelica's little sister
and a medattendant.



Gretia

A fifth-year apprentice
medattendant. Gave her
name.



Hartmut

An archscholar and
the new High Priest.
Ottilie's son.



Clarissa

An archscholar.
Engaged to Hartmut.



Roderick

A fourth-year apprentice
medscholar. Gave his
name.



Philine

A fourth-year apprentice
layscholar.



Cornelius

Karstedt's son and an
archknight.



Leonore

An archknight.
Engaged to Cornelius.



Angelica

Lieseleta's older sister
and a medknight.



Matthias

A sixth-year apprentice
medknight. Gave his
name.



Laurenz

A fifth-year apprentice
medknight. Gave his
name.



Judithe

A fifth-year apprentice
medknight.



Damuel

A layknight.

Royal Academy Retainers

Brunhilde

.....A sixth-year apprentice archattendant. Sylvester's fiancée.

Muriella

.....A sixth-year apprentice medscholar. Gave her name to Elvira.

Theodore

.....A second-year apprentice medknight. Judithe's little brother.

Royal Academy Associates

Ehrenfest's Nobility

Karstedt

.....Ehrenfest's knight commander. Rozemyne's noble father.

Elvira

.....Karstedt's first wife. Rozemyne's noble mother.

Bertilde

.....Brunhilde's little sister.

A candidate for being Rozemyne's retainer.

Lamprecht

.....An archknight serving Wilfried. Karstedt's son.

Nikolaus

.....Karstedt and Trudeliede's son. An apprentice blue priest.

Lasfam

.....Ferdinand's layattendant.

Eckhart

.....Ferdinand's guard knight. Karstedt's son.

Justus

.....Ferdinand's attendant and scholar. Rihyarda's son.

Veronica

.....Sylvester's mother. Currently detained.

Eglantine

.....Anastasius's first wife.

Fraularm

.....Ahrensbach's dormitory supervisor.

Hirschur

.....Ehrenfest's dormitory supervisor.

Pauline

.....Frenbtag's dormitory supervisor.

Solange

.....A medlibrarian.

Schwartz

.....A library magic tool.

Weiss

.....A library magic tool.

Hannelore

.....A fourth-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger.

Ortwin

.....A fourth-year archduke candidate from Drewanchel.

Martina

.....A sixth-year apprentice archattendant from Ahrensbach.

Raimund

.....A fifth-year apprentice medscholar from Ahrensbach.

Temple Associates

Fran.....In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.

Monika.....A cook who helps in the High Bishop's chambers.

Nicola.....A cook who helps in the High Bishop's chambers.

Gil.....In charge of the workshop.

Wilma.....In charge of the orphanage.

Dirk.....An orphan. Delia's little brother.

Bertram.....An orphan. Laurenz's little brother.

Konrad.....An orphan. Philine's little brother.

Nobles from Other Duchies

Sigiswald

.....The Sovereignty's first prince.

Anastasius

.....The Sovereignty's second prince.

Hildebrand

.....The Sovereignty's third prince.

Raublut

.....The Sovereign knight commander.

Georgine

.....Ahrensbach's first wife. Sylvester's older sister.

Detlinde

.....A member of the Ahrensbach archducal family.
Georgine's daughter.

Letizia

.....A member of the Ahrensbach archducal family.

Roswitha

.....Letizia's head attendant.

Sergius

.....Ferdinand's attendant. Roswitha's son.

Lower City Family

Gunther...Myne's dad.

Effa.....Myne's mom and personal seamstress.

Tuuli.....Myne's older sister and personal hairpin craftswoman.

Kamil.....Myne's little brother.

Lutz.....Tuuli's fiancé.

Others

Immanuel....The Sovereign High Priest.

Leonzio.....An envoy from Lanzenave.

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Prologue

The luggage from Ehrenfest arrived at the end of autumn, only a few days before the start of winter socializing.

Back when Ferdinand had first moved to Ahrensbach, his luggage had needed to be delivered to the office, opened in the presence of several knights and scholars, then thoroughly checked for anything dangerous. Now, however, it was taken straight to his chambers as a matter of course and checked only by his retainers. He attributed that to a tension-draining letter from Rozemyne.

“Here we have meals made with the seasonings Lady Letizia sent to Lady Rozemyne,” Justus said as he started checking the food in the time-stopper for poison. “We also have some sweets for Lady Letizia, and replies to the letters.”

Ferdinand sighed. “Gifts to thank us for our thank-you gifts... There is no end to this.” Were he to send Rozemyne something else in response, she would merely return the favor once again. The whole experience was still new to him, so he had no idea how to escape the loop.

Was she not going to ease up on these interactions now that she was getting older?

“May I entrust Strahl with the letter and sweets for Lady Letizia?” Sergius asked as the attendants began checking the letters. “This seems like a good opportunity for him to gain some experience. Strahl, given how many retainers Lord Gieselfried used to have as the archduke, can I assume you were rarely tasked with checking deliveries?”

Strahl was Ahrensbach’s former knight commander. During his extended service, he had earned the unfaltering trust of the late Gieselfried, the previous Aub Ahrensbach, but that meant nothing to Detlinde. After her father’s death, she had dismissed Strahl from her service for being “too critical and irritating.” He had chastised her for visiting the Lanzenave Estate on such a regular basis.

I cannot even begin to comprehend her foolishness. Why would anyone

dismiss a competent worker for such an asinine reason?

Strahl was far from the only victim; Detlinde had dismissed every single one of her sensible retainers, for they had all criticized her dealings with Lanzenave. The surveillance on her had weakened ever since midsummer, and now it was much harder to stop her from slipping away. Not even Georgine had enough reach to keep the situation under control. From what Ferdinand understood, she had even resorted to summoning Detlinde's elder sister, Alstede—who had been demoted to an archnoble—to watch over her irrational daughter.

Although I sympathize with Detlinde's house, one could say they are receiving their just deserts for not raising her properly.

It had been with half an eye on the struggles of Ahrensbach's archducal family that Ferdinand had taken Strahl into his service. The work expected of a knight commander was not quite the same as that expected of a guard knight, which occasionally caused the man some trouble.

"Lord Ferdinand, the letter instructs you to invite Lady Letizia to a meal and share this dish with her," Sergius said. "What shall we do?"

"We have little choice in the matter," Ferdinand replied. "We can all expect to be busy once winter socializing begins. Ask whether she would care to have lunch with me before then."

Sergius was the son of Letizia's head attendant, Roswitha, so he was invaluable when it came to contacting her. Strahl was similarly connected, as his daughter Fairseele was Letizia's apprentice attendant.

As far as Ferdinand was concerned, it was no coincidence that the retainers whom Detlinde had dismissed—each for a trivial reason—had also been those considered most trustworthy by the previous archduke. He could practically see the strings connecting Detlinde to her mother's manipulative hands, but his access to any meaningful intelligence had tapered off since his move to the western building.

"This has come at a good time," Eckhart muttered from behind Ferdinand, speaking quietly enough that only his lord would hear. "We did say that we wanted to probe Lady Letizia for information about Lanzenave."

He was right. Letizia had been making frequent trips to the Lanzenave Estate—ostensibly at Detlinde’s invitation, but more realistically at her command. Relying on her for intelligence would mean relying on the perspective and memory of a child, but Ferdinand still considered it a good opportunity to learn more about Lanzenave’s internals.

Neither my retainers nor I can even approach Detlinde anymore, since she no longer wishes to “deal with Ewigeliebe’s attitude.” A bizarre complaint, to say the least.

The scholars who had gone to protest the trade arrangements had come back with their heads in their hands. Ferdinand was genuinely impressed that an archducal family member could be raised into such a fool. It was hard to believe that Detlinde was the granddaughter of Veronica, who had so often proclaimed that there was no place for useless incompetents in the archducal family.

“Lord Ferdinand, do you have a preference for the date?” Sergius asked.

“The day of the farewell feast for Lanzenave. We have been forbidden from attending it, but as most of the nobles are going to be there, we will not be able to get any work done. I intended to pass the time by brewing... but a meal sounds like a fine idea. Lady Letizia is still underage and would not be allowed to attend the feast either, so our circumstances align. How convenient.”

On that date, they were guaranteed to be free from Detlinde’s involvement.

Sergius nodded, looking resigned. Ferdinand thought it was “convenient” that his fiancée, the next archduke, wished to distance him? There was surely something to be said about that, but Sergius could not find the words.

“I thank you ever so much for your invitation,” Letizia said, taking the seat to which Ferdinand was gesturing.

Justus produced one dish after another from the time-stopper. “Lady Rozemyne sent us a wide variety of meals, Lady Letizia. It would seem that she is very eager to hear your thoughts on them. To start, this is inspired by pome stew served with garneschel.”

Once the dishes were all on the table, Justus described each one with the aid

of Rozemyne's letter. None of the meals were recognizable at a glance, and even when Ferdinand tested them for poison, he struggled to determine which was which. In the meantime, Letizia merely stared at the plate sitting before her, frozen in place while gripping her cutlery.

Most likely because the garneschel is nowhere to be seen. Rozemyne used pork in its place, the fool.

Ferdinand set down his cutlery and gave Letizia a sympathetic smile. "The use of Ahrensbach seasonings should make it taste somewhat familiar, but with the lack of garneschel..." He picked up some fluffy bread. "You might want to consider it an entirely new dish."

Her resolve steeled, Letizia cut into the soft, buttery meat, then popped a small piece into her mouth. The morsel practically melted on her tongue, and an intensely rich flavor set her taste buds tingling. Her eyes widened... then a smile blossomed on her face. Anyone could see that she found it delightful, but her joy soon turned into curiosity.

"Rozemyne makes some truly unusual changes, as you can see," Ferdinand said with a shrug. "To think she still compared it to pome stew with garneschel despite the complete absence of garneschel..."

"Indeed. It is strange that something can taste so new despite being made with ingredients I am used to. It certainly is delicious, but I cannot believe it came out of the recipe I sent to Lady Rozemyne. It is something else entirely." She paused, then hesitantly asked, "Is all food in Ehrenfest like this?"

Ferdinand shook his head, not wanting Letizia to get any strange ideas. "Rozemyne is the only one who gives her chefs such unusual requests. The dishes might be palatable, but I still wonder how she comes up with them."

Letizia nodded, convinced.

"Lady Rozemyne has sent Ehrenfest dishes made with Ahrensbach seasonings and Ahrensbach dishes made with Ehrenfest seasonings," Justus said with a smile. "Even if you are having them for the very first time, they are bound to taste familiar."

"Rozemyne's original recipes might be strange to your palate, but I expect

people from other duchies to enjoy them more than dishes made with Lanzenave's spices and seasonings," Ferdinand added. Ahrensbach-style cooking had taken influence from its Lanzenave imports, leading to many sour and intensely spicy dishes. Were they served during an Archduke Conference, the reception would almost certainly be negative. "It might be wise to consider purchasing her recipes and introducing them as new Ahrensbach dishes. That can be negotiated during the upcoming Interduchy Tournament."

If Letizia agreed, it would give Ferdinand a reason to attend the Interduchy Tournament. He had gone the previous year as Detlinde's escort, but that option was no longer on the table. His true intention was to visit the Royal Academy's library to brew magic tools, but he needed an airtight excuse to keep Georgine from interfering.

Once an acceptable amount of time had passed, Ferdinand turned the discussion to the true reason he had asked Letizia to lunch: "That aside, I am aware you have been visiting the Lanzenave Estate at Lady Detlinde's invitation."

Letizia gave a knowing smile, suggesting that she understood everything. "Those of Lanzenave wish to stay on good terms with Ahrensbach, and Lord Leonzio is exceptionally friendly. However... Lord Ferdinand, I have seen that you do not chastise Lady Detlinde for her behavior. Should you not act more like her fiancé and indicate your disapproval of her actions?"

How foolish. Ahrensbach is to blame for her becoming an ill-behaving harlot. I do not even wish to look at that immoral adulteress; why must I dirty my hands dealing with her?

Knowing better than to voice those thoughts, Ferdinand merely smiled and shook his head. He did not care about Detlinde; his only concern was securing information about the Lanzenave Estate. But perhaps he had spoken too indirectly for a child to understand. He decided to phrase his next question more carefully.

"Lady Letizia, what manner of place is the Lanzenave Estate? I cannot approach it, as Lady Detlinde views me with suspicion."

"That reminds me—she said that if you and Lord Leonzio met, you would duel

over her hand in marriage.”

Ferdinand squeezed his eyes shut, suppressing the urge to snap, “That is not intelligence on the estate, fool.” Getting frustrated would only frighten her and make it harder to find out what he wanted to know; Rozemyne and the other Ehrenfest archduke candidates hadn’t been the only ones to learn from their time together. Instead, he smiled and said, “Is there anything else?”

“Lord Leonzio shares blood with the Yurgenschmidt royal family, and it would seem that he personally connected with the Sovereign knight commander this summer. Though the occurrence during the funeral created so many discussions, I am unsure how close they are or what truly happened.”

Ferdinand frowned. Raublut, the Sovereign knight commander, knew about the seeds of Adalgisa—and using that knowledge, he had convinced the king to remove Ferdinand from Ehrenfest. It was unclear how Raublut was connected with Adalgisa, but he viewed Ferdinand and Ehrenfest as enemies.

“Lord Leonzio of Lanzenave associating with Lord Raublut...” Ferdinand muttered. “I do not know how much Lady Detlinde’s words can be trusted, but this is a serious cause for concern.”

“I would not expect the Sovereign knight commander to do anything suspicious, especially after he went to such lengths to resolve the funeral incident.”

Raublut had gone along with Detlinde’s foolish demand to execute the culprits before a proper investigation could take place. On top of that, when the subsequent inquiry had started, he had continuously emphasized that *Ehrenfest* knights were to blame, directing the public eye away from the Sovereign Knight’s Order. The news that he was using his frequent visits to the Lanzenave Estate to consort with Leonzio—when he was supposed to be carrying out an impartial investigation, no less—was dubious to no end.

That said, from Letizia’s perspective, the Sovereign knight commander had worked ardently to keep the funeral situation under control. She believed that he deserved nothing but gratitude. Ferdinand determined that there was no point trying to change her mind; no matter how long he spent expounding Raublut’s questionable attributes, others would assume he was merely lashing

out in frustration now that Ehrenfest was under suspicion. The atmosphere that had set in during the inquiry was still fresh in his mind.

“I am more concerned about Lady Detlinde,” Ferdinand said with a smile, masking his true thoughts. “Who knows what is being whispered into her ear?”

Looking convinced, Letizia finally answered the question first put to her. “According to Lady Detlinde, there is a door in the Lanzenave Estate that can be opened only by the aub. The room beyond it apparently exists for Lanzenave princesses going to the Sovereignty. I can only imagine the problems that would have arisen if a princess had come when our foundation was not dyed.”

Ferdinand already knew what sat beyond that door: a teleportation circle connecting Ahrensbach with the Adalgisa villa.

Imagine telling someone to negotiate for the royal family to accept a Lanzenave princess before your foundation has even been dyed.

Had the royal family acceded to the demand, Detlinde would have embarrassed herself when she proved unable to open the door for the princess. The sheer foolishness of the situation made Ferdinand want to scoff, so he quickly changed the subject.

“It would seem that Lady Detlinde finally finished dyeing the foundation. I suppose I will need to begin offering my mana as well.”

Under normal circumstances, a fiancé from another duchy would not be made to perform Mana Replenishment, but documents from the previous archduke had made it possible to arrange—with a few troublesome restrictions.

He continued, “You shall use this opportunity to start practicing Mana Replenishment as well, Lady Letizia.”

“Lord Ferdinand... I was told that new sweets from Lady Rozemyne have arrived.”

There was a dark gloom in Letizia’s eyes as she asked about her reward. She was still not used to controlling her mana, so the thought of performing Mana Replenishment must have been anything but pleasant. Although she had plenty of stamina and did not collapse over the smallest inconvenience—two advantages over Rozemyne—she was a slow learner who wasted an enormous

amount of time on *breaks*.

“Indeed,” Ferdinand replied. “She sent more than usual to be given to you—at your request, apparently. In her response to my letters, she told me not to push someone your age too hard, despite what Ahrensbach’s circumstances might demand.”

Rozemyne asked not to be used as a reference point, but Lady Letizia would be much further in her studies if she desired books as a reward instead of sweets.

As he resisted the urge to sigh, Letizia clapped her hands together in realization. “I received a jar of Lanzenave sweets from Lord Leonzio. They are like feystones in appearance, and each one can be enjoyed for a very long time.”

Ferdinand had not received any sweets—both because he took very little interest in them and because Detlinde had ordered him to stay away from Lanzenave. Still, he was curious to see what Lanzenave had given her and whether they could be used for brewing.

“I received splendid toys as well,” Letizia continued. “Would you care to see? Unlike those made in Ehrenfest, they are rather strange and can only be used once, but they are unique and terribly fun. If you pull the string attached to them, flower petals of all colors shoot out and flutter around the room. It is beautiful and always manages to raise my spirits. Roswitha, could you fetch the sweets and toys?”

“Here you are,” the head attendant replied, first presenting her lady with the multicolored sweets that looked similar to feystones.

Letizia went first, eating one with a joyful smile. Ferdinand then did the same—and immediately had to fight back the urge to spit it out. His palate was being assaulted by an unbearable sweetness, as though he were eating a lump of pure sugar.

“This is much too sweet,” Ferdinand said with a grimace. He then crunched the candy into pieces, desperate to swallow it as quickly as he could.

Letizia stared in shock, appalled to see one of her precious sweets go to waste. Ferdinand was unfazed, though; letting the flavor settle in his mouth

would have been a miserable experience.

Ferdinand took a generous sip of tea to wash away the lingering sweetness, then turned to the other items Roswitha had brought over. “Are these the Lanzenave toys you told me about?” They appeared to be simple silver tubes, each with a piece of string dangling from one end. An explanation was certainly in order.

Letizia smiled happily as she picked one up and gave its string a firm tug. Out burst flower petals of various colors, which fluttered through the air.

How does the toy work? It is unlikely to be a magic tool, I know that much.

“Was that not positively stunning?” Letizia asked.

“May I have one of those toys? I am eager to find out how they are made.”

Letizia must not have expected such a request; she faltered, then let out a quiet “What...?” She had several toys, yet she was unwilling to part with a single one.

After staring at her Lanzenave goods for some time, Letizia finally made up her mind. She took the jar, which still contained three sweets, and one of the silver tubes, then looked up at Ferdinand. “U-Um, Lord Ferdinand... I intended to give these to Lady Rozemyne. B-But if you reduce my workload... I will allow you to take one!” Her voice had cracked as she forced out the last few words; she must have known that her attempt to negotiate was not very ladylike.

Ferdinand responded with a look of exasperation, having already deduced the culprit. “Has Rozemyne been putting strange ideas in your head, by chance?”

“She is not to blame. Rather, I... Um...”

Rozemyne was the only one who would encourage an archduke candidate from another duchy to act so brazenly.

Good grief. What a headache.

“Very well. In return for one of those toys, I will reduce your workload to some degree. However, take care not to accept too much advice from Rozemyne; she can be a bad influence at times.”

Ferdinand extended a hand, then heaved a heavy sigh. It was his job to clean

up the messes his charge created. He would need to spend the evening responding to Rozemyne's letter; there was much for which she needed to be chastised.

"Lord Ferdinand, here is a letter from Lady Rozemyne and a roughly drafted response," Sergius said, then looked down at the table. "That, um, was a gift... from Lady Letizia..."

"Put them in that ingredient box," Ferdinand replied, looking up from the silver tube he was meticulously taking apart and analyzing. It no longer bore the slightest resemblance to its original shape, but it was indeed one of the toys Letizia had received from Lanzenave. "At the pull of a string and without any magic whatsoever, the contents of the tube can be ejected. There were petals inside this time, but what if they were replaced with something else? This could easily become a very dangerous weapon. In any case, there is nothing more I wish to learn about this toy. You may clear it away."

"It was meant to bring happiness with its beauty..." Sergius said, looking sad.

Perhaps it was cruel of Ferdinand to disassemble the toy he had taken from Letizia and then simply have it disposed of, but those had been his intentions from the very beginning. Neither glum looks nor complaints would affect him in the slightest.

"Lord Ferdinand," Justus said, "although I do not mind the ingredients from Lady Rozemyne being moved into your hidden room, exercise some restraint with your brewing."

"We are not on watch tonight. Please do not trouble those who are."

Ferdinand waved them away, then went into his hidden room with the box containing both letters and ingredients from Rozemyne.

"Hmm... Nothing of particular note..."

He had decided to start by reading the letters—including a report from Justus, which was slotted neatly between Rozemyne's letter and the roughly drafted response. It was a summary of all the information they had acquired from Letizia's retainers over lunch and corroborated everything she had told them

directly. By this point, it was obvious that Raublut and Leonzio were on good terms. Many had seen the knight commander take great interest in Lanzenave's situation during the inquiry.

Raublut and Lanzenave, hm?

If the Sovereign knight commander truly was connected to the Adalgisa villa, then he presumably had strong ties to Lanzenave. It was possible he would try to convince the royal family to accept their princess.

Moreover, *Georgine* had taken Raublut to the Lanzenave Estate. The duty would normally have fallen to Detlinde, but she was being kept away from the knight commander after her emotional demand that the "treasonous criminals" be executed. It was a perfectly logical decision, but Ferdinand still considered it suspicious.

"It's just a gut feeling."

Sylvester's voice echoed in his mind. The man's instincts truly were impressive; countless times before, he had danced through disaster with nothing else to guide him.

Ferdinand was well aware that he needed to keep a close eye on Georgine and obtain as much intelligence as he could... but his move to the western building had complicated matters. Worse still, Georgine had most likely experienced the consequences of Sylvester's instincts firsthand. The two of them had grown up together, after all. Ferdinand could still recall the sharp breath she had taken in response to her brother's remark during the inquiry. She was presumably on guard as well.

Something is going to happen. There is no mistaking that.

However, no matter how things developed, negotiations with the royal family would go smoothly once he finished what he was making.

Ferdinand sat in his chair and thought about the maximal-quality fey paper Rozemyne had sent him. Her mana quantity was beyond impressive. As long as she followed his recipe, he would have everything he needed before the next Interduchy Tournament.

I am more concerned about what Sylvester and the first prince were alluding

to.

It had been stated during the inquiry that Ferdinand and Rozemyne were “clearly loyal to the royal family and obedient followers of royal decrees.” That was obviously true for Ferdinand, who had transferred into Ahrensbach at the king’s order...

But what about Rozemyne? Are they referring to the religious ceremonies held during the Archduke Conference, or something else entirely? Are the rumors true that she is being sent to the Sovereign temple?

Because of the recent incident, interactions between Ferdinand and Ehrenfest—where the culprits had come from—were under careful observation. Simply receiving his luggage and the letters had taken a great deal of work, so a private discussion with Sylvester had been out of the question.

Ferdinand probed the letters as best he could, but neither Sylvester nor Rozemyne touched upon anything he needed to know. In better times, he might have welcomed that lack of news. Perhaps he was overthinking things... but he had a bad feeling about their situation.

“Rozemyne’s letter says nothing about her Geduldh. How can I not be suspicious?”

Ferdinand touched the paper to see what she had written with her invisible ink, but still, there was no answer to his question. She was hiding something—something she could not consult him about.

“Please tell me your Geduldh.”

That was the question he had asked to make sure neither Ehrenfest’s nor Rozemyne’s situation had changed. He had only wanted confirmation.

Rozemyne often struggled with noble euphemisms, but she already knew that one’s Geduldh meant one’s home or someone one loved. If all were well, she would have written, “Ehrenfest is my Geduldh, as are my library and those of the lower city. You know that already, don’t you?” Or if she had not understood the question, she would have requested an explanation.

“Your decision not to answer at all is severely more suspicious. Fool.”

She had doubtless read too deeply into the question. Then, fearing what Ferdinand might say about her response, she had begun to doubt the identity of her Geduldh. Had something happened to encourage her indecision?

“Prince Sigiswald is aware of the circumstances, so the royal family is likely involved. I do not know the details, but I imagine their objective is the Grutrissheit.”

Those of the royal family had barely even been able to read the ancient language in the underground archive. If they were in desperate need of the Grutrissheit, they would naturally attempt to bring Rozemyne into their fold by any means necessary. After all, she had mastered the language during her time in the temple.

Was that something Rozemyne would wish for? Or had they driven her into a corner, as they had done to Ferdinand when giving him his decree? Being apart from her was painfully frustrating. If he could just glimpse her face, he would see through any attempts at secrecy in an instant.

“I should be able to help once I finish what I am making, but...”

What was Rozemyne trying to protect? What did she treasure more than anything else? Unless he could deduce what was motivating her, Ferdinand worried that his hard work would ultimately be for nothing.

Ferdinand tossed the letter onto his desk, frustrated that he could not simply ask Rozemyne for the answer he sought. The distance between them now truly was vast.

“I do not know the circumstances, what Rozemyne is hiding from me, or what is motivating her... but a single misstep and that fool will end up on another one of her rampages.”

The fog of concern and mistrust that had descended upon him was growing ever thicker. He had a much weaker grasp on the others’ intentions, so each move he made risked disaster. Rozemyne’s Geduldh had once been so clear; now it was anything but. And with Sylvester offering so little in the way of information, Ferdinand was struggling to see the path ahead.

Come winter, we will at least be able to speak through Raimund once again.

There is also the Interduchy Tournament coming up. As soon as the opportunity arises, I will stop these ineffectual attempts to probe her through letters and question her directly.

Ferdinand gave an annoyed sigh. For now, like Rozemyne, he had no choice but to put his troubles on hold.

Dirk's and Bertram's Baptisms

Once the Harvest Festival concluded, winter preparations began. This was nothing new, so I was comfortable entrusting the orphanage and my High Bishop's chambers to Fran and the others. As for Melchior and the apprentice blues, they were receiving the guidance of their temple attendants. Since they would spend most of their time in the castle, visiting only for the Dedication Ritual, their temple attendants were the ones who would suffer if such preparations weren't done properly.

Leaving the temple to its own devices, I focused on my own preparations. I was busy making the fey paper for Ferdinand and gathering the necessary materials to create my library shumils, but I'd still found the time to send food and sweets to Ahrensbach. My last delivery—the one I'd sent alongside my letters—was probably running out about now, but this one would last until we met during the Interduchy Tournament.

Eheheh... This time, I've sent an Ahrensbach dish with a delicious fish broth—tweaked to suit my tastes, of course. The resulting meal would probably make anyone used to the duchy's cooking exclaim, "This is delicious but completely wrong! It's a fake!" But that didn't bother me.

"Do we even need to go gathering at this rate?" Clarissa asked, looking up from Hirschur's list of ingredients while I continued to brew paper. "Lord Ferdinand must have everything we need in his workshop!" She was awestruck, and understandably so—the workshop was a veritable treasure trove for scholars into brewing.

"Most of those ingredients were from Justus's treks across Yurgenschmidt," I said, "but Ferdinand did gather some of them himself. During Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival, he used to go out and find ingredients while I focused on the rituals and preserving my stamina."

I used time-saving magic while glaring down at the brewing pot. This new recipe from Ferdinand involved so many steps and even more ingredients. It

was agonizingly tedious.

If only I could just shoot out a bunch of mana, make a ton of gold dust, then dump it all in. Siiigh...

As I prepared for the Royal Academy, an ordonnanz from Gretia arrived. After searching through the confiscated goods and other available hand-me-downs, she and the others had managed to obtain formal attire for Dirk's and Bertram's baptisms, as well as for the apprentice blues.

"They will need to be fitted," the ordonnanz said. "When can we bring them to the temple?"

"Let us say three days from now," I replied. "My brewing should end then."

"Five, then. To give you time to rest."

The ordonnanz repeated its message twice more—and with that, the date was arranged.

On the day of the fittings, it was decided that the blue apprentices would go to Melchior's room to select their favored clothes; a delivery from the archduke had recently arrived. There were plenty of outfits to consider: for the Feast of Beginnings, the children's playroom, the Royal Academy, riding, brewing... The list went on.

"We shall sort out Dirk's and Bertram's clothes in the orphanage," I said, then took Gretia and my attendants with me to the first floor, where one could find the large rooms for the pre-baptismal children.

Our two future nobles needed outfits for their baptisms and the playroom. Gretia busily fitted them with clothes, which she then placed into separate baskets.

"I can't believe we're getting clothes this pretty..." Dirk said, barely containing his amazement. He had only ever worn clothes that weren't robes when going to the forest.

Bertram grimaced in contrast. "I don't know... They look too old and cheap for a baptism." Just a year ago, he had enjoyed a more opulent lifestyle as the son

of Giebe Wiltord, so the garments did not come close to meeting his standards.

“My my... They are more than the child of a criminal would ever deserve,” Gretia sneered. “If you dislike them that much, then you should have bought your own. It would have saved me the trouble of finding these for you.”

“What?!”

Bertram spun around in shock and was met with Gretia’s cold smile. Her blue-green eyes, which were normally hidden by her bangs, were overflowing with scorn.

“It seems you do not understand your place,” she said, her tone merciless. “Aub Ehrenfest did not save the children of criminals out of compassion or kindness. His motivation was to increase the duchy’s noble population. If you give him reason to believe you might cause trouble, he will have you executed on the spot. Why should he allow you to live if you will only add to the conflict?”

Bertram went white as a sheet. He must never have heard anyone say that kind of thing in the temple.



Ignoring the boy's anguish, Gretia continued, "It was not at all easy to save you from the long-standing tradition of punishing entire families for the crimes of one member. You have been blessed with a phenomenal opportunity—and if you cannot grasp that, then you truly must be a troublemaker. Laurenz, would it not be best to eliminate him before he can be allowed to rejoin the outside world?"

"Gretia," I interjected almost on instinct, "you're going too far."

She smiled at me, her eyes narrowed. "This fool does not understand that more lives than he could count on his hands rest on his words and deeds—which means his brother, Laurenz, has not educated him properly. If you would spare even a dangerous troublemaker simply because he is a child, then we must at the very least beat the reality of his situation into him. Spoiling brats is not a kindness, Lady Rozemyne. At this rate, his stupid actions will claim the lives of all those saved from the sins of their families. Dirk will receive the same punishment, since he is being baptized with the aub as his guardian alongside them."

We had saved the children once, but that didn't mean they were immune from punishment. Plus, because they had entered the orphanage, any misdeeds they committed would cause *all* of the orphans to be marked as dangerous; the nobles would not distinguish between those who had come last year and those who had always been there. Both the name-sworn nobles and the apprentice blues working hard would receive the same treatment. In the worst-case scenario, the entire temple would once again be scorned as people assumed it was harboring criminals.

Having made her point clear, Gretia asked, "That is not what you want, is it, Lady Rozemyne?"

I shook my head.

"As I suspected," she said. "I shall accompany Dirk for his baptism, while one of Lord Melchior's attendants will accompany Bertram for his. The aub is preparing their rings."

"You would do that in spite of everything? I thank you ever so much, Gretia."

She gave a slight smile. “The clothes for their baptisms will remain here. The rest I shall take to the playroom in the castle, same as last year.” Then, with the baskets in hand, she went on her way.

Laurenz gave his brother, who was looking despondent, a light rap on the head. “Bertram. Gretia might have been harsh, but she was right—moving to the castle is going to be a wake-up call, whether you like it or not. You can’t expect the same kindness you receive in the orphanage.”

From there, Dirk and Bertram chose their rooms in the noble section and the furniture that would go inside them. They would select attendants next spring. Konrad wanted to spend a bit more time in the orphanage as an apprentice gray priest; then, once he had grown and developed enough mana to perform religious ceremonies, he would receive a room as an apprentice blue.

Dirk and Bertram gave test blessings with a ring I’d allowed them to borrow, practiced the harspiel in preparation for their debut, and worked to memorize the steps of the baptism alongside some noble etiquette.

The autumn coming-of-age ceremony came and went in the blink of an eye, as did the winter baptism. By the time the commoner ceremonies had ended, most nobles had arrived at the Noble’s Quarter. My retinue moved to the castle as well in preparation for winter socializing. The debuts and baptisms of the noble children would accompany the feast.

On the day in question, in my room at the castle, Otilie and Lieseleta began helping me change into my ceremonial robes. Gretia had gone to the temple to fetch both Dirk and the children’s harspiels from the orphanage.

“These ceremonial clothes are to be taken to the Royal Academy once today’s ceremony is complete, correct?” Otilie asked.

“Correct,” I replied. “Aub Klassenberg contacted Sylvester—Dedication Rituals are going to be held at the very start of the term.”

Because we wanted to borrow divine instruments from the Sovereign temple, we couldn’t hold our ceremony at the same time as theirs. Performing it earlier was better for the third-years; although a single ceremony was unlikely to have

much of an impact, they would appreciate any opportunities to obtain more divine protections. Thus, a discussion with the Sovereign temple and the Royal Academy's professors had concluded with an agreement that the students' Dedication Rituals would take place shortly after their return to the Academy. They would participate in three separate waves: the laynobles, then the mednobles, then the archnobles.

"My circumstances are being ignored," I said. "What do you think about that, Lieseleta?"

"The Sovereignty and top-ranking duchies always force their will upon those who are beneath them," she replied. "However, Lord Wilfried convinced the aub to let him lead the mednoble ceremony and Charlotte the laynoble one, to ease your burden."

"That is very helpful."

Preparing for the ritual and going through the necessary meetings would take up a lot of my time, so unless I managed to blast through my classes, I wouldn't be able to return for Ehrenfest's Dedication Ritual.

"And to make things easier for the students, the aub negotiated for the blue priests who accompanied you during the Archduke Conference to be allowed to visit the Royal Academy. If nothing else, you can expect to have more than enough guards until the end of the Royal Academy's Dedication Rituals. Most heartening."

In other words, Hartmut, Cornelius, Damuel, Leonore, and Angelica were all permitted to visit the Royal Academy until the Dedication Rituals were over.

"As much as that helps me, I am sure it will inconvenience everyone else," I said, making my disapproval clear. "This sudden arrangement means they must now scramble to prepare for the Royal Academy. Their plans for winter socializing are surely in tatters, especially when they were going to use my absence to get ready for our move to the Sovereignty."

Ottilie consoled me with a wry smile. "Lady Rozemyne, there is no need to be frustrated. One of them was quite overjoyed about the opportunity to accompany you."

“That goes without saying...”

Once I was changed, an ordonnanz from Gretia arrived: Dirk, Bertram, and the other blue apprentices were now at the castle.

“Welcome, new children of Ehrenfest!” Hartmut declared, standing beside me atop the stage.

The door was thrown open, and in came a line of children due to become nobles—including Dirk and Bertram, who were at the very end. They numbered twelve in total, and six of them were also going to be baptized today.

Hartmut read from the bible, then began the mana registration. It was customary to go in order of status, from lowest to highest, so Dirk was called over first. He looked tense as he approached.

The events that followed were quite ordinary: I presented the mana-checking tool for him to hold, he did as instructed and made it shine, then the audience applauded.

I smiled at Dirk, who let out a quiet, relieved sigh, then took a medal. He stamped it with the tool, thereby registering himself.

Wait, what?

Even though he had registered his mana, the colors had barely changed. They were faint, which made it hard to tell whether he had them all or none at all. The most I could really deduce was that the Wind element was most prominent.

What is one supposed to do at a time like this?

I instinctively turned to look at Ferdinand, only to make eye contact with Hartmut. It was kind of awkward, but he didn’t seem to notice my reaction; he merely approached and peered down at the medal.

“He appears to have the divine protection of Wind...” Hartmut muttered, stating what I already knew. He looked just as confused as I was feeling.

I guess he doesn’t know what’s happening either.

No amount of contemplating would give me an answer, so I turned back to Dirk and smiled. “One god has granted you her divine protection: Wind. If you

dedicate yourself to becoming worthy of this protection, you will surely receive many more blessings.”

That unusual development aside, Dirk’s mana registration was complete. Hartmut put the medal into a box, then Sylvester took the stage with a ring in hand.

The audience stirred. “That boy must be a child of the former Veronica faction,” some whispered. “That child escaped punishment,” said others. In an instant, it was clear that Gretia had spoken the truth.

Ignoring the buzz, Sylvester presented the ring to Dirk. “I grant this ring to you, Dirk, now that you have been accepted by the gods and the people. I shall become your guardian in place of your parents, and your status will henceforth depend not on your house but on your mana quantity. We witness the birth of a new mednoble. Congratulations.”

“I am grateful from the bottom of my heart, Aub Ehrenfest,” Dirk replied, wearing a smile that betrayed not the slightest hint of anxiety. He gazed down at the red feystone adorning his newly acquired ring, which sat on his left third finger.

“May Geduldh the Goddess of Earth bless you, Dirk,” I said, granting him a blessing.

Dirk returned it, as we had practiced. The light floated through the air before reaching me.

The audience applauded again, though more hesitantly this time. It was the first time I’d experienced such blatant rejection during somebody’s baptism. Unease sprouted in my chest... but we had to move along.

“Bertram,” I said.

The second of our two orphans came onstage to register his mana, having to endure the harsh glares of the gathered nobles, who were carefully searching for the slightest mistake or revealing step. His medal changed color normally.

My thoughts returned to Dirk; there had to be a reason for his unusual medal. I would also be considered one with the Devouring, but that hadn’t happened during my baptism. Then again... maybe I was the weird one. My mana had

come out omni-elemental, boasting every single color.

“Two gods have granted you their divine protection: Water and Fire,” I said. “If you dedicate yourself to becoming worthy of this protection, you will surely receive many more blessings.”

Again, Sylvester approached with a ring. This one had a blue feystone; Bertram had presumably been born during the summer.

“I grant this ring to you, Bertram, now that you have been accepted by the gods and the people. I shall become your guardian in place of your parents, and your status will henceforth depend not on your house but on your mana quantity. We witness the birth of a new mednoble. Congratulations.”

“I am grateful from the bottom of my heart, Aub Ehrenfest,” Bertram replied, kneeling with both arms outstretched. Sylvester must have recognized the gesture, as he bent down slightly and gave the boy his hand. Bertram respectfully clasped it, then pressed the back against his forehead.

A hush fell over the room as everyone took in the sight: atop the stage, Bertram was giving the greatest display of gratitude a noble could make.

After that, the rest of the children were baptized, and the debuts began. The laynobles played their harspiels first, then it was time for Dirk, Bertram, and the other mednobles. Dirk played relatively well, considering how little time he’d had to practice. Bertram, meanwhile, was exceptional—a clear indication that he had received a proper upbringing as the son of a former noble.

Once the debuts were complete, Hartmut made a few closing remarks as the High Priest before we both took our leave. I needed to change out of my ceremonial robes and into my socializing clothes. The gifting ceremony for the new students took place; then I ate lunch with the archducal family in the dining hall and returned to the grand hall to socialize.

During the usual greetings, I was asked again and again whether I was moving to the Sovereign temple. As my escort, Wilfried was tasked with denying the rumors and shooing the curious nobles away.

From there, I went around speaking to the children of the former Veronica

faction, wishing them well at the Royal Academy. In the process, I noticed a few nobles aggressively devouring their food. It was strange; I might have expected that a few years ago, when the food was new, but most people saw it as commonplace these days.

Weirdos...

Hartmut must have noticed my staring because he quietly said, “Those are presumably the nobles who were ordered to return home from the Sovereignty. The plan is for you to meet them in a more relaxed environment when you return midway through winter. There is no need to speak with them now, in the presence of such a large audience.”

“Lady Rozemyne,” Dirk called.

I turned to see him with Bertram, Gretia, and several people I recognized from the temple. They were socializing with the apprentice blues at their center. Meanwhile, Nikolaus and the other soon-to-be first-years had put on the duchy capes and brooches they had just received.

“Dirk, don’t act so close to Lady Rozemyne at public events,” Bertram said, tugging him away by the arm and teaching him about noble society. “We should wait until she addresses us.”

Dirk immediately apologized to me.

I smiled, then focused on Bertram. “Your performance earlier was excellent. And your display of gratitude to the aub actually silenced the nobles, if only for a moment.”

Bertram faltered, then sheepishly looked away. He was nothing like his elder brother. Laurenz would have turned my compliment into a joke by asking whether he should kneel before me as well.

“Bertram,” I said, “I must ask you to join Gretia in watching over Dirk, to ensure he does not make any serious mistakes.”

He grimaced. “Lady Rozemyne, I mean no disrespect, but that is asking too much of me.” It was true that keeping an eye on Dirk—a boy from the orphanage who knew so little about noble society—would not be easy in the slightest, but Bertram had really taken to the role of teacher. It was nice to see

them getting along somewhat better than before.

“Bertram seems to be doing well, doesn’t he, Gretia?”

“I would not act so relieved yet,” she replied. Her tone and the look she was giving the children conveyed the severity of their situation.

The Winter Playroom and Another New Term

The beginning of winter socializing meant the children would start using the playroom. I went to greet them, as always, then played games and studied with them. In particular, I wanted to make sure that none of the children from the former Veronica faction were being left out or bullied.

The children old enough to attend the Royal Academy treated their peers from the former Veronica faction as they would anyone else—maybe because they had spent time together at school, or maybe because they wanted the atmosphere at the Royal Academy to stay the same no matter how much the outside world changed. In any case, their juniors followed their example, showing no signs of discrimination whatsoever. Everyone was focused on getting sweets, either by winning the games they were playing or trying to secure top grades.

“I expected the mood to be much heavier, so that was a pleasant surprise,” Charlotte said.

“Sure was,” Wilfried added. “Charlotte was worried the playroom might end up the same as when you were asleep. Seems that hasn’t happened.”

The archducal couple was too busy socializing to join us for dinner, so it was just us children tonight. It gave us a chance to leisurely reflect on the playroom and plan for the Royal Academy. We were using an area-affecting sound-blocker so that we could freely express our opinions.

Wilfried and Charlotte were relieved that the playroom’s atmosphere had stayed positive. Melchior was also enjoying his time there.

“There might now be an unspoken rule among the children that they will only allow themselves to be wrapped up in the adults’ faction disputes while they are here in Ehrenfest,” I said. “That way, they will spend their time at the Royal Academy working together to surpass the other duchies. I hope their attitude lasts.”

Charlotte nodded. “Assuming they hold on to that perspective as adults, it might be the case that future generations focus more on interduchy politics than internal power struggles.”

Wilfried nodded, then turned to Melchior. “I was most surprised to see how well you led the other children, Melchior. I was worried that you might face some issues, since you were hidden away in the northern building for last year’s purge, but everything has been going swimmingly.”

“Brother, I think that’s because I spent so much time speaking and playing with everyone in the temple orphanage,” Melchior replied with a smile. “There are more kids here, but the experience is more or less the same.”

As he had said, his time spent in the orphanage was paying off. He was able to keep an eye on his surroundings rather than being completely absorbed in his games.

“I’m more concerned about how our upcoming first-years are going to find their classes,” I said. “There weren’t many chances for them to study during last year’s playroom, were there? Are they going to be okay?”

Plenty of work had already been done toward preparing for their written lessons, so I wasn’t worried about those. I wasn’t sure everyone would obtain the highest grades possible, but they would all at least pass on the first day. One thing that had stood out to me, however, was that they hadn’t practiced the harspiel enough. There was an aggressively large skill gap between the new students and our current first-years.

“Sister, there is no point worrying about that now,” Charlotte assured me. “We will get them to practice while our musicians are here. Then we can keep a close eye on each student’s progress.”

“So you’ll make sure everyone’s up to scratch, huh?” Wilfried muttered. “Just don’t repeat the nightmare of our first year.”

How rude. The library isn’t at stake, so I obviously won’t go on another rampage like that.

“I was worried about Dirk and Bertram not fitting in, but they both seem to be doing fine,” I said. They had played cards and karuta at the orphanage, so they

had won a few games in the playroom and celebrated over the sweets they'd received as prizes. Nobody had treated them with any obvious malice either, though maybe that was because we were keeping watch.

Only half a year had passed since Dirk resolved to become a noble. He was good at playing cards, but he was lagging behind when it came to history and geography—not to mention the harspiel. Above all else, though, there was still plenty for him to learn about noble common sense.

As for Bertram, he had needed to seriously reevaluate his position. If not for the purge, he would have been a mednoble bordering on an archnoble. Now that he had been baptized from the orphanage, however, he was at the very bottom of the mednobles—a tremendous step down from his previous status. He couldn't even call Laurenz his brother anymore. It was easy to see where his uncertainty had come from.

"This is the first time the aub has baptized nobles from the orphanage," I said. "Melchior, they are bound to face some discrimination, but please keep an eye out to ensure it does not develop into anything serious."

"Yes, Sister."

The apprentice blues staying at the castle weren't really being inconvenienced either. One of the shrine maidens had said that while she didn't mind their current living arrangements, she felt more relaxed at the temple where she had an attendant. On the whole, it seemed as if the apprentice blues had all bonded with their servants over the course of the Harvest Festival, so they found it a little upsetting to be apart from them. I got sad whenever I needed to leave Fran and the others, so I understood exactly what they meant.

"I can only hope that nobody who resents the former Veronica faction has been assigned as a playroom attendant," I remarked. "Florenzia chose them, correct, Charlotte? Do you know who is looking after the children staying in the castle?"

"Fear not, Sister—my adult attendants will join them upon my return to the Royal Academy. There is nothing for you to worry about."

Florenzia's attendants would be busy taking care of the newborn, so Charlotte had assigned her own attendants to replace them. That was nice to hear.

“Oh, that reminds me—Charlotte, the smith has delivered my order.”

“Already? I’m ever so delighted, dear sister.”

Of course, I was referring to the pendant emblazoned with my crest. It was a precious gift, and we had come up with the design ourselves, so it was no mere medallion. Instead, it was fairly extravagant, boasting openwork that depicted Charlotte’s maternal symbol and the sigils of the gods whose divine protections she sought. Decoration of such a precise and detailed nature was Johann’s specialty, so the finished product was fairly wonderful.

We had also asked for the inclusion of a small socket among the sigils so that Charlotte could insert her own feystone. For charms meant to obtain divine protections from the gods, it was best to use one’s own feystones to facilitate the flow of mana and make it easier for one’s prayers to reach the gods.

“Your order?” Melchior probed.

“Charlotte asked me for something that would demonstrate our connection as sisters even when we are apart, so I got my personal smith to make her a pendant marked with my crest.”

“Can I not have one too?” he asked. His face was clouding over, but whether or not I ordered another was entirely up to him.

“Charlotte’s pendant was the product of my excitement that she wanted us to remain sisters even after my departure. Most other nobles in her situation would consider me a stranger once I am gone, doubly so with my adoption being nullified, so I can only hand out mementos to those who request them.”

Making the crests on demand was fine, but handing them out unprovoked risked my intended recipients refusing me with a curt “But we are going to be strangers once you leave.”

“I respect you as my elder sister, Rozemyne, and will miss you when you’re gone,” Melchior said. “I want your crest too.”

“Then I shall order another. If we make the request now, Johann should be able to finish it over the winter.”

The settled snow was still quite shallow, so our order would reach Johann

without issue. I'd heard that he had plenty of spare time over the winter—as was often the case when you were trapped indoors—so he would probably be glad to have work to do.

Melchior's face lit up with a smile. I explained the nuances of Charlotte's design, then worked with him to come up with a new pendant.

All of a sudden, Wilfried started drawing beside us. "I want something like this," he announced.

"What? You want a connection to me as well, Wilfried...?" I asked, frowning. The requests from Charlotte and Melchior made sense—they actually liked me, after all—but Wilfried had loathed our engagement and even bad-mouthed me quite a bit. I didn't understand why he would want my crest.

"Like I said, I still love you as a sister," he explained, looking slightly awkward. "That's become especially clear to me over the past few days."

Gone was the tense atmosphere that had always hung over him. Perhaps, by speaking his mind, he had managed to grow out of his prickly rebellious phase. But was this not way too sudden? Not once over the course of our entire engagement had we acted like a real couple, so my feelings hadn't changed before or after it was canceled. I couldn't understand why his were flip-flopping so much.

"Dear brother," I said, "your attitude has changed drastically since our engagement was canceled. Is there really that much separating a fiancée from a sibling?"

"Of course," he replied. "Ah. Are you still unaware, maybe? It should become clear soon enough. I didn't understand it when we first got engaged either."

"But you understand it now?"

"Yeah. Couples and siblings are worlds apart, so this outcome was always inevitable for us. It wasn't something I could endure." He looked me over, then smiled contentedly. "Hopefully it won't be long before you grow up as well."

He then held out the design he wanted, looking truly enlightened. I couldn't help feeling a bit envious that he had grown up before me.

Oh, but I see he hasn't outgrown his love for pointlessly cool designs.

I sent a letter to the Plantin Company the very next day, informing them of my urgent orders for Johann. Then I spent the rest of my time before the new academic term observing the playroom, having discussions over dinner, studying for my classes, and going over the steps for the upcoming Dedication Rituals.

On the day the fourth-years were scheduled to leave, Wilfried and I teleported to the Royal Academy.

"Please relax here for now, Lady Rozemyne," Lieseleta said. "Gretia and I shall prepare your room."

This year, Lieseleta had taken Rihyarda's place as my adult attendant. This was so Brunhilde could focus on business with the royal family and top-ranking duchies, and Ottilie could remain in Ehrenfest to keep Clarissa in check. It would also be a good opportunity for Lieseleta to interact with Sovereign attendants.

"Lieseleta, please confirm that rooms have been prepared for Hartmut and the others who will be joining us for the Dedication Rituals," I said.

"As you wish."

As she and Gretia went off to put my things away, Brunhilde guided me to the common room. She would only be acting as my retainer here at the Royal Academy. Back in Ehrenfest, she had a room in the western building and was now being treated as a member of the archducal family. This meant she couldn't enter the northern building without the archduke's permission, so we seldom saw one another.

For the first time in quite a while, Brunhilde prepared some tea for me.

"How are things in Groschel?" I asked.

"Thanks to the archducal family's help and Clarissa's supportive circles, everything looks so much better. In the autumn, one carpentry workshop after another sent us its completed products, and our buildings had doors and windows in the blink of an eye. Father was especially glad to have approved the

wider roads in the business district when he saw the abundance of carriages passing through it. Our plan is to finish the interiors over the winter, with the aim to have all manner of stores ready come spring.”

As craftsmen and merchants had streamed into Groschel with instructions, so, too, had supplies for the winter. The rapid increase in the city’s population had made it quite busy indeed.

“Also,” I said, “in regard to your little sister, Bertilde—how am I expected to interact with her?”

“Bertilde has been eagerly serving Lady Elvira in anticipation of becoming your attendant. I would be grateful if you decided to take her as a retainer, even if only for this winter.”

Brunhilde wanted to give her sister an opportunity to serve as my apprentice attendant. It would only be for a short while before my departure, but I accepted at once.

“You mean to train her yourself, correct?” I asked. “Perhaps you could involve Melchior’s retainers; I intend to borrow those who will serve him at the Royal Academy, but they will not be able to enter my room. At the very least, I wish to give them the opportunity to witness the preparations and groundwork that go into tea parties with top-ranking duchies. There is much they will need to see to understand.”

Out of all of Ehrenfest’s students, Brunhilde had the most experience dealing with top-ranking duchies. It was important that she train her successor as much as she could before graduating.

“As you will,” she said. “This is for Ehrenfest’s future; I shall do the best I can.”

Brunhilde went on to inform me that she had received some Ahrensbach cloth through Florencia, then praised my decision to prop up the first wife. “The Leisegang elders’ indignation was quite troublesome when we were beginning the generational shift. And after I promised the aub during our engagement that I would support Lady Florencia, I am pleased beyond words that you chose to bolster her over me.”

Brunhilde and Florencia were of the same faction. It wouldn’t have been wise

to drive a wedge between them when the duchy's women had finally been unified under a single banner.

"I do not expect to be of much use, considering my lack of socializing skills," I said. "Still, I will do everything I can to support you—to minimize the impact my move has on Ehrenfest."

"Your kindness is appreciated, Lady Rozemyne, but..." She gave a refined giggle. "As your attendant, *I* am meant to support *you*."

Brunhilde then took a step back, allowing Muriella to approach me in her place. She had given her name to Elvira and was, to my knowledge, rather busy with the printing industry. She, too, served as my retainer only at the Royal Academy.

"May this term be a peaceful one, Lady Rozemyne," she said.

"Indeed. This may be our last term together, but I am looking forward to it. How is the printing industry, might I ask?"

"We scholars are puzzling over the use of mana-efficient teleportation circles to send your books to the castle. Frequent testing has caused rapid degradation, and my current task is to make the circles require even less mana to use."

According to Muriella, Elvira was working hard to ensure that new books could easily be sent to me as part of my deposit system.

Oh, Mother!

"You may wish to ask Raimund of the Hirschur Laboratory for advice," I said, sincerely moved. "Perhaps you could even do some research with him. I will be busy making magic tools for my library."

Charlotte returned to the Royal Academy the following day—then Theodore came a day later. He told us about the Gutenbergs staying in Kirnberger.

We took a breather once the second-years had all arrived, then went gathering in preparation for our lessons. Some of the apprentice knights in the higher grades had gone already, but the apprentice scholars and attendants still

needed materials. We had decided to go together for maximum safety.

I climbed into my highbeast, after which Judithe took the passenger seat; she was going to be guarding me for the duration of our trip. But as we exited the dormitory on our way to the gathering spot, something above us caught my eye: familiar beams of light, and the same magic circle that had taken over the sky. Curious, I started ascending to get a better look.

“Lady Rozemyne, how far up are we going?” Judithe asked quizzically. Her concern brought me back to my senses. The other guard knights were following me skyward, looking quite uncertain.

“I intended to go even higher, but this will do for now,” I said. “I would not want to worry anyone.”

I descended to the gathering spot, then partially covered it with Schutzaria’s shield. “This is the most I am going to do,” I said. “The rest of you will need to regenerate the gathering spot so that you can obtain more divine protections. The adults managed it during the Archduke Conference, so I expect you to succeed as well.”

The other duchies’ students were replenishing their own gathering spots, so our students needed to start doing the same; otherwise, they might start falling behind in the long term. Because I was leaving next year, I wanted to make sure they were up to scratch before then. Ehrenfest currently had the lead when it came to religious ceremonies, and that was something I wanted them to maintain.

“We should gather more rejuvenation potion ingredients than usual,” I said. “The Dedication Rituals will require them.”

Philine did as instructed, collecting as many ingredients as she could, then gathered with the others to take part in the replenishment ritual, a look of steely determination on her face. I taught everyone what to recite, at which point the students formed a ring and started praying to Flutrane. The laynobles and younger students had to remove their hands from the earth before the ceremony was completed, but it concluded without incident. Just as during the Archduke Conference, the gathering spot had regenerated.

“Wilfried, Charlotte,” I said, “take everyone back to the dormitory. There is

something I wish to check, but I will need to go high up into the sky.”

“Can you tell us what that ‘something’ is, Sister?”

“A secret related to the royal family.”

“Understood. Be careful.”

There was no point explaining the magic circle to them when they couldn’t see it. I climbed back into my highbeast, then soared up into the air—far, far above the lines of mana.

“Lady Rozemyne, how high are we going?!” Judithe cried, once again in the passenger seat. She was trembling with fear, having never reached this altitude before.

“Just a bit higher,” I replied. “I need to see it all.”

Once we were high enough, I gazed down at the snow-covered grounds of the Royal Academy. They reminded me of a white canvas, onto which were painted the lines of divine colors that formed the magic circle. Everything beyond it was lost to a sea of clouds stretching into the distance in all directions. In a sense, it looked as though the Royal Academy had been made to suit the circle, not the other way around.

This is a selection magic circle.

Like the circles that had appeared in the bible and atop the whirling stage, its purpose was to reveal Zent candidates. It hadn’t changed at all since the Archduke Conference, nor had it disappeared, even though I’d returned to Ehrenfest after creating it.

The magic circle appeared after I prayed a ton and dedicated my mana to the gods, so it definitely has something to do with choosing the next Zent, but... I don’t know. Will it change when I’m adopted and registered as a member of the royal family?

The bible hadn’t said, nor had any new information appeared within it since the magic circle’s appearance. From what I’d seen, there wasn’t even an explanation in the underground archive. Maybe it was lurking in one of the texts I’d yet to read, but most of the documents there were just long-winded

explanations from previous kings that boiled down to “We worked our fingers to the bone. Now it’s your turn.”

Mana activates magic circles, so maybe I could activate this one by showering it with blessings... Or I could drop some mana-packed feystones on it. Uh, wait... Raining stones down on the other students probably isn’t the safest idea. Mmm...

I tried to think of other ways to activate the magic circle, but nothing came to mind.

Prayers made the circle appear, so maybe prayers will make it activate. Does that mean I should return to the shrines? Or is there somewhere else I should pray? And is it just me, or have I spent so much time praying recently?

We’d performed a Dedication Ritual in the auditorium after the magic circle appeared, but that hadn’t seemed to change much.

“Did you learn anything?” Judithe asked me.

“I can see something... but I’m not sure what to do next. Let’s go back to the dormitory.”

This wasn’t the first time my lack of creativity had troubled me. I couldn’t force my guard knights to wait around while I spent an eternity contemplating my next move.

“Judithe... can you think of a good place to pray?” I asked.

“We just prayed at our gathering spot, but I think it’s more common to pray at the back of the auditorium. Where the shrine is, I mean.”

To a normal person, the chapel was obviously the best place. I was so used to praying here, there, and everywhere that it hadn’t even occurred to me. Plus, now that I thought about it, I’d prayed in the auditorium during the Archduke Conference, not the Farthest Hall where the shrine was located.

I guess we’ll need to try the Farthest Hall next. Wait, isn’t that where we’re holding the upcoming Dedication Rituals...?

Maybe they would activate the magic circle. It was a good thing I was realizing this now and not during the rituals when it would already be too late. Giving the

royal family a heads-up would probably be a good idea.

“Very good, Judithe. Very good!” I exclaimed. “The whole country will thank you for what you’ve done today!”

“I, um... Huh?”

As we made our way back to the others, I couldn’t help but smile at the confusion in Judithe’s violet eyes.

It was the new students’ first day at the Royal Academy. Their seniors welcomed them with open arms and treated them as guests.

Bertilde was among the new arrivals, and she came to the common room at the guidance of the eldest students. She was brought to a seat near me and smiled as her elder sister, Brunhilde, poured her some tea. The two siblings had the same large amber eyes. They also had a common trait in their long, silky hair, but it wasn’t the same color; Brunhilde’s was crimson, while Bertilde’s was rose pink.

“Welcome, Bertilde,” I said. “Listen closely to Brunhilde as my apprentice attendant.”

“Yes, Lady Rozemyne.”

Melchior’s apprentice retainers were brought over to me as well, whereupon we discussed our future plans. As always, those in my service would need to finish their lessons as quickly as possible so they could accompany me to the library.

“As first-years, you should be able to finish your lessons sooner than the others,” I explained. “Study well and obtain good grades, for Melchior’s and your own sakes.”

“Understood!”

Nikolaus was the last of the new students to arrive. It certainly was busy today—even the senior students were in the common room. We discussed the plans for this year’s joint research; then I assigned duties to the apprentice scholars whether they were archducal retainers or not.

“Last year, we came dangerously close to losing our research results to Drewanchel,” I said. “Take care to preserve our secrets this year, and include something unique to Ehrenfest in your work.”

In the meantime, Damuel, Angelica, Leonore, Hartmut, and Cornelius arrived. They comprised the adults who would don blue robes to participate in this year’s Dedication Rituals.

“The laynobles will perform their Dedication Ritual first, then the mednobles, then the archnobles and archduke candidates,” I said. “Participating in them all will doubtless test you, but I trust you to remain strong.”

“It must be concluded before Ehrenfest’s Dedication Ritual,” Hartmut announced with a smile. “You may count on us to arrange the dates with Klassenberg and the Sovereign temple. Your studies will not be impacted in the slightest.”

At times like this, I remembered that Hartmut truly was reliable. If only he hadn’t said it while grinning from ear to ear and stroking the crested feystone at his chest.

“Ah, I see everyone is here,” said a familiar voice. “I am Hirschur, the dormitory supervisor.”

Upon her arrival, Hirschur went through the year’s schedule. The fellowship gatherings and advancement ceremony would take place as per usual. Then, once her explanation was complete, she came straight over to me.

“Lady Rozemyne, did you gather the ingredients necessary to make your library magic tools?” she asked. “They aren’t common, by any means, so I was a tad worried.”

“I did. Ferdinand already had them in his workshop.”

“Ah, of course he did. Then my research shall proceed without issue. What a relief.”

Wait, you were only worried about your research? I knew it! You and Ferdinand are two peas in a pod. Like mentor, like student!

Once again, my days at the Royal Academy began with me sighing at Hirschur.

While everyone else desperately studied, I spent my valuable free time before the advancement ceremony in the common room, reading the books we'd received from Ehrenfest's provinces. Among them were an illustrated version of *A Ditter Story*, this year's installment of *Royal Academy Love Stories*, and new volumes of *The History of Dunkelfelger*.

Since the arrangement of my royal adoption, there hadn't been time for me to read anything but documents essential to the various handovers happening back in Ehrenfest. I couldn't remember when I'd last been able to lose myself in a book. It was rejuvenating, as though I'd just wet my parched throat with a glass of cold water.

Aah, this is bliss. I don't feel alive without a book in my hands.

The Fellowship Gatherings (Fourth Year)

The advancement ceremony was due to begin at third bell, and the atmosphere in the dormitory was electric. Lieseleta and Bertilde were doing my hair while Brunhilde and Gretia were off distributing hairpins to the new girls.

“You have a real talent for styling hair, Bertilde,” I said.

“Lady Elvira said the same thing. I simply love doing it.”

Bertilde went on to tell me about the jobs she’d done while working for Elvira and the various things they had discussed. Her rose-pink tresses were adorned with two hairpins: one she had just been given as a first-year and another she had received from her parents in celebration of her enrollment at the Royal Academy.

Lieseleta observed us for a while, then started preparing my hair ornaments and double-checking my luggage—a clear indication that Bertilde had passed as my apprentice attendant.

“Lady Rozemyne,” she said, “will Brunhilde, Matthias, and Roderick suffice as your retinue for the fellowship gathering?”

“Indeed.”

“I also have information from the scholars who went gathering the other day: it would seem that Klassenberg has a new archduke candidate in attendance this year. Would you like me to remind you of her name so that you can greet her?” There was a teasing smile on her face; I suspected that someone had already told me this while I was reading and that I’d completely ignored them.

“Please.”

“Her name is Lady Gentiane. She is the daughter of Aub Klassenberg’s third wife. I expect you will see her frequently concerning the Dedication Rituals.”

Lady Gentiane. Lady Gentiane...

“Good morning, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Good morning, Damuel.”

I’d moved to the common room once I was ready for the advancement ceremony only to find Damuel there waiting for me. Hartmut and Cornelius were also present, but we’d already attended the Academy together, so I didn’t find that particularly strange. Damuel, though... Seeing him here felt very strange indeed, especially with the blue robes he was wearing.

“Leonore, Angelica,” I said, “I am glad to have you in my service today.”

The men were wearing blue robes because they were going to attend a meeting with the Sovereign temple while I went to the advancement ceremony and my fellowship gathering. I didn’t know whom Klassenberg was going to send, but Eglantine had sent word that today was the day.

“I shall entrust any discussion about the Dedication Rituals to Hartmut,” I announced. “Damuel, Cornelius, make sure he does not do anything... crazy.”

“Understood,” they chorused.

There was bound to be some lingering tension between Hartmut and Immanuel, so I wanted someone to keep an eye on them.

“You intend to reunite with some of your friends, right?” Cornelius asked. “Go and enjoy the fellowship gathering.”

“As you will, dear brother.”

Cornelius then sent me out into the entrance hall, where the other students were standing in lines and wearing their Ehrenfest capes. It was cute seeing the first-years look so tense. Brunhilde and Charlotte had distributed rinsham, so everyone had glossy hair.

“Let’s go, then,” Wilfried said. “First-years, make sure not to forget our door number or lose your capes or brooches; otherwise you won’t be able to get back into the dorm.”

With that, we opened the door and stepped out of the dormitory. There had been a slight change in the duchy rankings, but nothing too major. We lined up in the eighth spot.

The advancement ceremony began as usual and segued into an explanation of the Royal Academy's classes. It was announced that students would now obtain their schtappes in their third year, as had been decreed during the Archduke Conference, and that each class's lesson plan had been heavily modified to incorporate past curricula.

"But I was so looking forward to obtaining my schtappe..." Bertilde groused, her lips pursed. The other nearby first-years seemed more dissatisfied than not—which made sense, as the reason for these changes hadn't been revealed.

"A schtappe proves you are a noble," I said, "so I understand your desire to obtain one posthaste. But believe me—you have far more to gain from obtaining it later."

"Is that so?"

"Indeed. We learned that one can obtain an abundance of divine protections from the gods through prayer and offerings of mana. If you were to obtain your schtappe in your first year, before your mana changed due to these protections, it might not be able to control your mana in later years. That is why these adjustments have been made. If you see any first-years complaining about the decision in class, be sure to educate them."

Bertilde nodded, her pout replaced with a look of understanding. Nikolaus did as well, having apparently overheard my explanation.

The advancement ceremony concluded, and we all separated into groups for the fellowship gatherings. We archduke candidates moved to the Small Hall, each with three of our retainers.

"Lord Wilfried, Lady Rozemyne, and Lady Charlotte of Ehrenfest the Eighth have arrived," announced a scholarly man standing at the door.

We went inside, then saw Hildebrand, who was in attendance this year as well.

It soon came time for us to greet the prince, so Wilfried spoke as our representative: "Once again, Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time has woven our threads together and blessed us with a meeting." I was squished between him and Charlotte.

“The Zent is looking forward to the Dedication Rituals,” Hildebrand said, smiling brightly. “I am not formally a student, but he has permitted me to take part in the mednoble section, which should not put a strain on me. I am quite looking forward to participating in a Royal Academy ritual for the first time.”

Prince Hildebrand sure is a hard worker, isn't he? He compressed his mana to enter the archive, studied the ancient language, and now this. It's hard to believe he's not even a student yet.

This time, he actually wanted to participate in the Dedication Ritual as a member of the royal family. If the young Hildebrand continued to take part in future religious ceremonies as well, he would surely obtain many divine blessings. Perhaps he would even be the most likely candidate among the royals to become Zent.

“It is crucial that Yurgenschmidt’s future rulers play an active role in religious ceremonies,” I said, “so I find your hard work and forward-thinking attitude admirable, Prince Hildebrand. I pray that the upcoming Dedication Ritual will be a productive experience for you.”

From there, we stepped offstage to begin our sweep of the top-ranking duchies. First was Klassenberg. Sitting behind their table was a girl not much taller than me—a little cutie with blue eyes and violet hair. She was with her retainers and welcomed me with a smile. The peaceful, elegant air she exuded was characteristic of a Klassenberg woman.

Wilfried, Charlotte, and I knelt to perform the usual first-time greetings.

“Lady Gentiane, may we pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the harsh judgment of Ewigeliebe the God of Life?”

“You may.”

Lady Gentiane accepted the blessings from our rings, then gave the same refined smile I was used to seeing from Eglantine or Primevere. “The aub has informed me that we are to perform Dedication Rituals with Ehrenfest as joint research. As you know, I am only a first-year, so there is much about the ceremony I will not understand. I request and will appreciate your guidance, Lady Rozemyne.”

“We greatly appreciate your cooperation, Lady Gentiane.”

Next up was Dunkelfelger. Lestilaut had graduated, so Hannelore was the only archduke candidate at her table this year. Our eyes met, and we exchanged warm smiles.

“Rozemyne,” Wilfried said and gently urged me forward. Because I was closer to Hannelore than he or Charlotte were, he was letting me greet her instead.

“Lady Hannelore. Once again, Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time has woven our threads together and blessed us with a meeting. It’s been too long.” We’d seen one another during the Archduke Conference, but that was how I genuinely felt. “Ehrenfest has produced several more books this year that are sure to delight you. We have *A Ditter Story* with Lord Lestilaut’s illustrations, and more volumes about the history of your duchy. There is also the third volume of *The Story of Fernestine*, but I suspect you have already finished it.”

Hannelore’s male guard knight looked very interested in Ehrenfest’s new books, but Hannelore had something else on her mind. “Indeed, the conclusion moved me,” she said. “Is there going to be a new volume of *Royal Academy Love Stories* this year? I am eager to read more wonderful, romantic tales...”

“Of course. Let us exchange books once again.”

“I am looking forward to it.”

The greeting concluded with more smiles; then we moved to Drewanchel. There were several archduke candidates at this table, including some fresh faces, with Ortwin standing as their representative. Wilfried performed the standard greeting and was invited to take part in more joint research this year.

“I am afraid we already have plans to carry out religious research with Klassenberg and Frenbeltaag. If we are to collaborate, it will need to be on a smaller scale. We certainly do not have time for major research involving our entire duchy.”

“Then we will need something to draw your interest...” Ortwin replied. He then turned to look at me as he said, “I shall consult Professor Gundolf.”

So he intends to take that approach again, does he? Well no matter what Professor Gundolf says, I’m not gonna do it.

I wanted to spend my research time here at the Royal Academy creating magic tools for my library and improving the teleportation magic circle to make things easier for Muriella and Raimund. That said, I was going to be very busy this year in both Ehrenfest and the Royal Academy. I would need to attend more than a few meetings with the royal family. I also wanted to inspect my new villa and pick my Sovereign retainers before my adoption. Plus, upon returning to Ehrenfest, I would need to bring the apprentice blues with me from the playroom to perform the Dedication Ritual. I also needed to account for meetings with the nobles returning from the Sovereignty to Ehrenfest and meeting Ehrenfest nobles in general.

In short, I needed as much time back in Ehrenfest as I could get, so it was questionable whether I would receive *any* opportunities to work on my library's magic tools. It was likely that I would end up having to entrust the ingredients to Hirschur.

Gah... I expected this, but I really won't have much time to do the things that actually interest me.

There was a dark cloud hanging over me by the time we left Drewanchel; my winter was going to be so painfully busy. Gilessenmeyer and Hauchletzte were next, but I decided to leave those greetings to Charlotte.

At the first of the two tables, Luzinde of Gilessenmeyer introduced us to her younger brother and sister. The former was a second-year who had been adopted during the autumn. As I understood it, Gilessenmeyer only had female archduke candidates, and it wasn't rare for them to adopt men from their extended family to serve as grooms and produce more archduke candidates. That said, it was unusual to adopt someone right before they were due to select their specialized course.

The sixth-year girl representing Hauchletzte also introduced us to her two younger siblings. Wilfried appeared to be familiar with the brother, whereas the sister was adopted and a new student.

"There sure are a lot of new archduke candidates this year..." I mused. "The number has shot right up."

"Don't you remember what Hartmut told us?" Wilfried replied. "The method

to obtain more divine protections has resulted in more adoptions, remember?”

If anyone had told me that, I certainly didn’t remember. As it turned out, more and more archducal families were adopting blood-related archnobles with enough mana who hadn’t yet begun their specialized courses at the Royal Academy.

“Hartmut shared the information with us so that he wouldn’t need to pull you away from your book—he knew you were making the most of a rare opportunity to read at your leisure—but you were still right there when he gave the report. You must have heard *something*.”

“It isn’t unusual to block out one’s surroundings when reading. That said, it *was* my first chance to delve into a book in quite some time, so I’ll acknowledge that I might have been a bit more oblivious than usual.”

Wait, Hartmut actively worked to preserve my reading time? The heck? He seems so cool all of a sudden. My heart almost skipped a beat.

I was extremely appreciative of what he had done, but at the same time, I didn’t want to miss any important information. I would need to ask him to at least write out his reports so that I could read them later.

As I pondered the situation, Wilfried finished greeting Ahrensbach. Detlinde had graduated and Letizia wasn’t yet old enough to enroll as a student, so Detlinde’s retainer Martina was serving as her duchy’s representative.

“How are Lady Detlinde and my uncle doing?” Wilfried asked.

“Ahrensbach owes a debt of gratitude to Lord Ferdinand. Now that our foundation has been dyed, he has been helping us by offering his mana.”

What?! They’re making him do Mana Replenishment on top of paperwork and the religious ceremonies?! He isn’t even married yet!

As I stared at Martina in shock, she gave a troubled smile and continued, “To repay Lady Detlinde for accepting the royal family’s tyrannical demands that he be given a hidden room prior to their marriage, Lord Ferdinand offered to temporarily assist us with our Mana Replenishment. He truly is a kind man.”

“Tyrannical demands”? The order had only come because *they* were being

tyrannical, delaying the Starbinding and refusing to let Ferdinand return to Ehrenfest. Making him supply mana on top of that was ridiculous.

Moreover, was Ferdinand really the one who suggested this little compromise? Is he planning something like when he gathered ingredients under the cover of Spring Prayer? Or is Ahrensbach lying to avoid criticism?

I considered these possibilities while Martina asked about Aurelia's condition. Both seemed valid, so I really wasn't sure.

We went on to greet Gaussbuttel, then returned to our seats. Now the lower-ranking duchies would start coming to us.

Murrenreue, who was one year above me, came to our table on behalf of Immerdink. She brushed back her purple hair and smiled—a sickly combination of pity and scorn that immediately put me on edge.

“Lady Rozemyne,” she said, “word reached me that your adoption is being undone so that you can join the Sovereign temple. It might be for a good cause—to spread the importance of religious ceremonies throughout Yurgenschmidt—but it must be tough knowing that you will lose your archduke candidate status and enter the temple as a mere archnoble. How tragic...”

Sounds like that rumor is popular everywhere.

Our nobles had come to the same conclusion as a result of all the secret summons we'd received from the royal family. Had other duchies noticed them too? Alternatively, maybe Immerdink was just one of the duchies Georgine had incited to tell the king that the Saint of Ehrenfest deserved to be the Sovereign High Bishop. Based on the giggling I could hear, Murrenreue wasn't the only one pleased to hear that Ehrenfest was going to lose me.

“The Zent has not and will not order us to send Rozemyne to the Sovereign temple,” Wilfried replied. His flat declaration caused a stir and drew more attention to us.

“That cannot be...” Murrenreue uttered, blinking her orange eyes. “Aub Ehrenfest received several summons from the king during the Archduke Conference.”

“The royal family did propose the idea, but it was refused,” I said with a smile,

revealing the flaw in Murrenreue's assumption. Even if she believed that I was destined to be bumped down to the rank of an archnoble, I was currently still an archduke candidate of a higher-ranking duchy. There was no reason for me to remain silent as she spread her misinformation.

I continued, "Because of my health, I would not be able to endure the long trips to perform religious ceremonies in other duchies. Thus, Aub Ehrenfest imposed a rule: he would only allow me to become the Sovereign High Bishop if archduke candidates of each duchy and members of the royal family went to the Sovereign temple to learn the ceremonies themselves."

Murrenreue paled upon hearing that I'd intended to drag the archducal families of every single duchy down with me. It was clear from her expression that she'd never even considered entering the temple.

"Unless the royal family and the country's aubs agree to enter the Sovereign temple, I will not be going there," I concluded. "Still, depending on the Zent's decision, we might end up there together very soon, with you clad in blue apprentice robes."

Because of my sharp response to Immerdink, none of the other duchies asked about the rumor.

Frenbelta's archnoble spoke with Wilfried and Charlotte about this year's joint research. They were leading it, not I, so I took a back seat and merely listened. As it turned out, Frenbelta's nobles were already visiting their temple to pray and dedicate their mana, hoping to obtain as many divine protections as possible.

Oh, that reminds me—our nobles still aren't going to the temple aside from when they meet with the commoners.

That thought lingered in my mind as I sat through the rest of the fellowship gathering. There were so many new archduke candidates that it ended up much busier than usual.

By the time we returned to the common room, Hartmut and the others had already come back from their meeting. At once, I asked for a report on the state of the Dedication Rituals. Wilfried and Charlotte listened as well, since they

would need to oversee the lower ranks when they took part.

“Good work on the negotiations,” I said. “What did you decide?”

“Because the rituals count as joint research and not part of the curricula, they cannot be held in place of classes,” Hartmut replied. “Instead, they will take place on Earthdays.”

Most students wanted to experience a religious ceremony as soon as possible to increase their divine protections, but the professors considered joint research an optional addition for those who had already finished their classes. Thus it was decided that those who wished to participate could do so on their own time.

“Not all students will participate, since this is joint research and not a class,” Hartmut explained, “and making an exception now would only lead to trouble in the future. The earliest time this can be done outside of class is on an Earthday.”

I’d thought Klassenberg would push to hold it even sooner, but apparently not. The Sovereign temple had asked for the ritual to be done all at once rather than in three parts, but the Royal Academy had declined, since the mana disparity between the laynobles and the archduke candidates was simply too great.

“The Sovereign temple kept hounding Lady Eglantine to agree with them, but because those blue priests and shrine maidens fell unconscious during the previous Dedication Ritual, Immanuel was left without a leg to stand on,” Hartmut said with an amused smirk. “Lady Eglantine then suggested that the young students participate in a group below their current status, for safety’s sake, in the same way that Prince Hildebrand intends to participate as a mednoble.”

Charlotte sighed in relief. “Prioritizing the students’ safety is a wise move. Offering mana is hard when you are not used to doing it.”

“The younger laynobles might be better off not participating at all,” Wilfried added. “It can be hard to tell how much mana you have left when performing replenishment. Do we know which Earthday we will need to perform on?”

“Lady Rozemyne needs to return to Ehrenfest as soon as she can,” Hartmut said, “so we have decided to hold the ceremony for archnobles and archduke candidates on the first Earthday. The mednobles will perform on the second one, then the laynobles on the third.”

I nodded along with Hartmut, but Cornelius glared at him. “I thought we should be more considerate of Rozemyne’s health, so I suggested we start with the laynobles and work our way up from there,” he said.

That wasn’t a bad idea. The first week of the academic term was invariably loaded with classes, so being able to rest on that Earthday was essential. By the third week, I would already have passed them all.

Damuel sighed. “Cornelius wanted to prioritize her health, while Hartmut wanted to carry out her wish of returning to Ehrenfest as soon as possible. It was a terrifying battle to behold.”

Leonore similarly shook her head with a sigh. “Lady Eglantine intervened as an arbitrator, and it was decided that the first ritual would comprise the archduke candidates and archnobles, since acting in descending order of status is ideal.”

“They argued in front of the royal family?” Wilfried and Charlotte asked in unison, both wide-eyed. I was surprised as well.

Just what were those two doing?!



“Lady Eglantine gave a half smile and said that she respected them both for being so dedicated to their charge,” Damuel explained, a distant look in his eyes, “but I thought I was going to die then and there.” Leonore looked equally as exhausted.

I wanted to put my head in my hands and plead with them *never* to argue in front of the royal family again. Was this how my guardians felt whenever I did something crazy?

“I suppose I will need to apologize to Lady Eglantine the next time we meet.”

The First Week of Classes

Classes were due to begin tomorrow, so everyone had started studying desperately the moment we returned from the fellowship gathering.

“Because the change in classwork was announced in advance, we can expect the Drewanchel students to be a mighty foe,” Charlotte said while studying alongside her peers. “Let us strive to maintain our current rank.”

“Ehrenfest has been studying the old curricula for years,” Wilfried assured the others, taking the opposite approach to motivate them. “We don’t have much to worry about.”

Of the adults who had come to participate in the rituals, Damuel, Cornelius, Leonore, and Hartmut acted as tutors, looking after the first-years who hadn’t managed to secure enough study time. Angelica had instead opted to guard me, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t being helpful. Her stalwart presence allowed the apprentice knights to focus on their schoolwork, so she was indirectly assisting the students. It was the same as how her presence in the temple helped the other guards devote themselves to paperwork.

“Lieseleta, Angelica, I wish to return to my room to send a couple of ordonnances,” I said.

Together, we went to my room; I didn’t want to distract the others from their studies. My first ordonnance was to Solange, asking to schedule the new students’ registrations, while the other was to Eglantine, apologizing for Hartmut and Cornelius’s argument and warning her that something unexpected was likely to happen during the Dedication Ritual.

In response, Solange told me to bring our new students at lunchtime two days from now. Eglantine asked me to stay behind after my next class with her to explain what I thought might happen.

How am I meant to elaborate? Her guess is as good as mine.

Everyone spent the next morning studying as much as they could, taking only a short rest for breakfast. Then they headed to their first classes.

This year, we fourth-years had written lessons in the morning and practical classes in the afternoon. Everyone passed the former without incident. Many duchies had seemed troubled about the changes to the curricula, but the top-ranking duchies had studied more than enough in preparation.

In the afternoon, we went to our brewing class. Our exam required us to make a rejuvenation potion of reasonably high quality... which I finished ASAP with the help of a time-saving circle. Compared to the paper Ferdinand wanted, it was so mind-numbingly easy to brew that I ended up needing to while away the rest of the lesson.

As I gazed around the room, I noticed that everyone was more experienced than before. In particular, several of the apprentice scholars were doing very well, most likely because they had so many opportunities to brew.

“You can pick out the apprentice scholars at a glance,” I said. “They look so much more skilled than everyone else.”

“But they were still unable to keep up with your advanced methods, even though you are an archduke candidate,” Hannelore remarked with a bemused smile while carefully cutting up some herbs.

“Oh, but Lady Hannelore, I happen to be a scholar as well. There is nothing strange about my experience with brewing.”

“Rozemyne, normal archduke candidates don’t make their own magic tools or rejuvenation potions,” Wilfried interjected. He had a death grip on his messer-transformed schtappe, while Hannelore was holding hers with an unsteady hand. Their lack of experience was clear to see.

“Still, even archduke candidates are required to brew their own engagement feystones,” I replied. “Lord Ortwin seems rather experienced. Perhaps you should work on your brewing skills instead of always focusing on gewinnen, dear brother. If you cannot even cut with adequate precision, how will you manage to spread your mana evenly?”

Wilfried grunted and stared at his transformed schtappe. Ferdinand wouldn’t

hesitate to fail a brew based on how its ingredients were prepared.

The next day meant more written lessons, which we once again passed with flying colors. Perhaps because my retainers had taught them, even the first-years received fairly high scores.

This lunchtime, our new students were due to be registered at the library. I ate quickly, then immediately took them and my student retainers to meet with Solange. Of course, because the registration had nothing to do with the Dedication Rituals, my adult retainers stayed in the dormitory.

As we made our way down the halls, Bertilde approached me and said in a bright voice, “You really love libraries, don’t you, Lady Rozemyne? My sister told me the Royal Academy’s library has two shumils, one black and one white.”

I could guess that Brunhilde hadn’t been the only one to mention Schwartz and Weiss. Lieseleita and the others were always going on about how cute the shumils were.

“Yes, and they truly are adorable,” I replied, then turned to address everyone. “That said, take care not to touch them. There are protective measures in place to keep them from being stolen.”

I opened the door to the library with the pass Solange had sent me, then led everyone inside. As usual, she and the shumils met us outside the reading room.

“It has been some time, Professor Solange.”

“Indeed, Lady Rozemyne. I am glad to see you well.”

As we exchanged greetings, Schwartz and Weiss surrounded me. They were as adorable as ever.

“Here, milady.”

“Gone a long time, milady.”

“I am pleased to see you both,” I said with a smile. “Professor Solange, is Professor Hortensia in the office?”

Solange looked troubled as she said, “No, she is away at the moment. It would

seem she took ill and is currently bedridden.”

“Is her room not here in the library?” I asked quizzically. I didn’t understand why Solange sounded so uncertain when they shared the same dormitory.

Solange slowly shook her head. “Hortensia’s husband sent her an order to return home midway through the summer. She hasn’t returned since.”

After the Archduke Conference, Hortensia had ended up with significantly less work to do. Thus, she had started commuting from home—at least until she received an abrupt summons from her husband, at which point she had stopped showing up entirely.

“She was perfectly healthy at the time,” Solange continued. “She sent word that she doubted she would return to the library anytime soon, and that was the last I heard from her. The most recent update I can provide came from her husband right before the term started. He said she had fallen ill at the end of autumn and would not be able to perform her duties as a librarian this winter.”

The snowy Royal Academy was anything but a good place to rest and recuperate. Letting Hortensia return to work would only make her even more unwell, so it was best that she take some time away.

“The end of autumn was quite a while ago, was it not?” I asked. “I sincerely hope she feels better and is only staying away from work to be safe.”

“Yes, truly. I am worried about her, but I cannot check on her at the start of the term when the library is so busy...” Solange said, wearing a sad smile now that she was once again the Royal Academy’s only librarian. “I will simply need to trust that she is going to recover soon.”

From there, she began registering the new students. I decided to take that opportunity to look around the reading room.

“Schwartz, are there any new books?” I asked.

“Here.”

Schwartz guided me toward a bookcase housing various new study guides. I glimpsed the door to the closed-stack archive along the way and remembered what Hortensia had said to Detlinde.

I still wonder what that whole “Schlaftraum’s flowers” thing was about... Ferdinand hasn’t sent me any updates since he told me he’d look into it.

He was probably too busy—and as that thought crossed my mind, Philine came to get me. The registrations were done.

“It was nice to see you,” I said to Solange. “I shall try to come again soon.”

“That sounds wonderful. There is a large-scale ceremony being held this year, I am told. It will test you, I am sure, but you have my full support. Please do return when you find the time.”

Overjoyed that she was encouraging me, I gave an enthusiastic “Right!” and went to leave. But before I could reach the door, Schwartz and Weiss stopped me.

“Mana, milady.”

“Hortensia gone.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Solange said. “They haven’t been supplied with mana since the start of the term. Lady Rozemyne, I don’t mean to impose, but could you replenish their reserves a little?”

I could guess that the feystone Hortensia had given Solange was depleted. As I stroked the shumils’ foreheads, an idea came to mind.

“Professor Solange, since Professor Hortensia is absent, it might be wise to petition the royal family for more support from the Library Committee. I plan to spend most of the term back in Ehrenfest.”

“That is an excellent idea. I shall contact Prince Hildebrand at once,” Solange replied, starting to brighten up. “Plus, it would seem that Hortensia’s husband is teaching him swordplay. He might know more about her condition.”

A wave of relief washed over me as I exited the library.

We had music as this afternoon’s practical class. Same as last year, we were asked to play a song chosen for us and a song of our choice. I’d spent some of my time at the temple practicing with Rosina, so I was able to complete the former without issue; but rather than giving me a pass, Pauline merely frowned.

“Is something the matter, Professor Pauline?”

“That will not do at all, Lady Rozemyne. Where was the blessing?”

“Um... I didn’t think that was part of the test...”

Since last year’s classes, I’d visited the shrines and upgraded my schtappe, so I didn’t need to worry about rogue blessings anymore. I couldn’t say that to her, but still—how were blessings relevant to a music lesson?

“Blessings appear when one plays in earnest, do they not?” she asked.

“Refusing to give one simply will not do, especially when you hope to spread the value of religious ceremonies through your joint research with Klassenberg and Frenbeltag. So play again, this time with a blessing.”

Truth be told, I was completely baffled, but I channeled mana into my ring and sang a prayer. It was dedicated to the Goddess of Water, so the light of my blessing came out green.

“An excellent performance,” Pauline said with a satisfied smile. “Flutrane the Goddess of Water must be overjoyed.” She then gave me a pass... but I was starting to get very concerned.

Don’t tell me my whirling instructor is also going to expect a blessing.

Once the lesson was over, I returned to my room in the dormitory. My student retainers were studying in the common room, leaving only Lieseleta, Leonore, and Angelica with me. I consulted them about Pauline’s demand and expressed my concern that the same thing was going to happen during my whirling class.

“If your professor requests it, why not give a blessing?” Lieseleta asked. “Is that not better than having to desperately contain it?”

“I doubt it would cause you any trouble,” Leonore agreed. “Is there a problem?”

I cast my eyes down. “It just bothers me that she didn’t ask anybody else. I was the only one.”

Leonore was right that I could give out blessings with ease, but it still seemed unfair that my grade—and mine alone—had depended on it. I was already

being singled out; this was just going to make things worse.

“Could she have done it deliberately to make you stand out?”

“Leonore?”

“By reinforcing the idea that you are special, the professors are making it easier for the other duchies to accept your adoption into the royal family.”

For a moment, I almost agreed with her suggestion—but then I shook my head. The royal family had said they would prepare the adoption in secret; why would they have leaked such sensitive information to the Royal Academy’s professors, who had deep connections to their home duchies and fed intelligence back to them?

“The royal family could easily be pulling the strings, asking them to draw attention to you under one guise or another. It seems safe to assume the professors haven’t been made privy to the real situation, considering how many duchies believe you are joining the Sovereign temple.”

According to Leonore, during their meeting about the Dedication Ritual, Eglantine had asked for me to perform all three ceremonies. Even more evidence that the royal family wanted to cement my reputation as somebody special.

“Furthermore,” Leonore continued, “as you are entering the royal family through abnormal means, this should minimize the jealousy and resentment you face. It’s better to have people understand why they chose to adopt you; otherwise, they’ll wonder why they weren’t chosen instead.”

Now *that* made sense.

“Well, as long as it’s for a good reason...” I said. “In any case, I think I shall do some reading before dinner.”

“One moment,” Lieseleta said, then held out a box. “Please check this first. I received it from Raimund, who was waiting for your classes to finish. It is a delivery from Lord Ferdinand and Lady Letizia. There are letters inside.”

The letters and everything else in the box had already been checked for anything dangerous. I opened it up and saw a tube with a string at the end, and

small glass jars containing what appeared to be red, green, and yellow feystones.

“According to this letter,” Lieseleta said, “Letizia has shared with you a toy and some sweets she received from Lanzenave. The toy can only be used once, it says, but it does something beautiful. She wishes for Ehrenfest to enjoy it as well.”

Letizia had adored the sweets and meals I’d sent her, so she’d sent me some of the presents she’d received from Lanzenave. Ferdinand had told her I would appreciate them “as a lover of strange things.”

“As well as the correspondence from Lady Letizia, Lord Ferdinand included some details about Ahrensbach. If you are confident that you will score highly tomorrow, you may spend the time until dinner responding to them. Hartmut and the others will oversee the students.”

“I thank you ever so much, Lieseleta.”

She nodded, then started instructing the others as my head attendant: “Angelica, guard her door. Leonore, help Cornelius tutor the first-years.”

I put away my harspiel and study utensils, then took the box into my hidden room and started reading the letters. The jars containing what I’d assumed were feystones actually held colorful candies, while the tube was essentially a party popper that shot out pretty things when you pulled its string. Letizia described Ferdinand taking one of the toys and dissecting it.

Seriously? Don’t you ever take a break from being a mad scientist?!

Letizia went on to explain that she had given him the toy in exchange for a reduced workload. It was nice to know she hadn’t ended up in tears, at least. She was probably more used to dealing with Ferdinand now that they’d spent so long together.

“I wonder, what might the letter from Ferdinand say?”

He had written that Ahrensbach’s foundation had been dyed before the start of the current academic term and that he was registered with it so he could supply it with his mana. Letizia was also devoting mana, though she was relying on feystones while she got used to the process. The envoys from Lanzenave had

apparently returned home at the end of autumn; then the border gate had been closed behind them.

Ferdinand concluded by saying he wanted to purchase the recipes for the dishes I'd sent.

"I don't see anything about his Geduldh question. Maybe it wasn't important after all..."

I touched the letter, but no hidden text appeared. On the one hand, I was glad that he hadn't pressed me about it. But on the other...

This probably means he's going to corner me at the Interduchy Tournament and ask me directly.

"Well, if that happens, I'll just be frank with him: no matter how much I rack my brain, I can't figure out what he wants from me. Why does he want to know in the first place? He really needs to explain these things!"

I gave a self-assured nod while I wrote my response. On the front, I thanked Letizia and said to Ferdinand, "Those recipes will not come cheap. I am looking forward to our negotiations." Then I turned over the paper, readied my invisible ink, and penned a simple message: "You agreed to supply Ahrensbach with mana even though you haven't yet had your Starbinding? Just what are you plotting?"

The next morning's written lessons went as smoothly as ever. Then we had another brewing class, wherein we were told to create a synchronization potion—a concoction that made it easier to push one's mana into something else.

Hirschur projected the brewing instructions on a white cloth at the front of the classroom, then cackled and asked us, "Does anyone know what this potion is used for?"

I answered at once, brimming with certainty. "It makes it easier for knights to synchronize with criminals and such when their memories are being viewed." I'd consumed the very same potion when I had my mind peered into.

Hirschur gave me a very strange look. "Another... unusual example, Lady Rozemyne."

“Um... does it have other uses?” I asked, tilting my head at her. It was then that I noticed the uncomfortable expressions on the other students’ faces. I could tell they wanted to mutter, “How doesn’t she know?” and “What’s she going on about?”

Hirschur heaved an exasperated sigh before giving me an answer. “This potion is most commonly used to help newly married couples dye each other’s mana. Were it only used in the circumstances you suggested, which require the permission of an aub, it would not be taught in a standard course at the Royal Academy.”

Eep! Ferdinand never told me that!

We were taught to make the potion because it would prove essential to us all in the future. I already knew how to brew it, thanks to Ferdinand... but I evidently hadn’t known its main purpose.

Ferdinand, you dummy! Teach me its normal use, not the weird one!

Still criticizing him in my head, I got straight to brewing. It was a potion that even laynobles could use, so making it was simple enough.

“Your brew is perfect,” Hirschur informed me once I was done. “But your earlier remark was still very bizarre.”

“Please blame my mentor for that,” I replied. “But in any case, why is a potion necessary for dyeing someone? And when exactly would you use it?”

Hirschur made a rare, troubled face and pressed a hand against her forehead. “That Ferdinand...” she groaned.

But since the others weren’t even close to finishing their brews, she played along.

“Let us begin at the start,” she said. “Nobles inherit their elemental affinities from their parents’ mana. You know this, I trust?”

“Yes. They also get the element of their birth season, right? The elements one has from birth are called aptitudes and can be checked using one’s baptismal medal. On the whole, it is easier to cast spells or brew with elements one has an aptitude for.”

Hirschur gave a satisfied nod. “Correct. Channeling mana into something does not immediately lead to mixing—the mana already inside will resist and repulse it. That said, there is minimal resistance between closely related family members. I expect you knew that as well.”

I remembered how much it hurt when Ferdinand poured his mana into me during the trombe hunt. My body had naturally resisted it, but he had exploited that to seal my wound. There was also the time when I touched the divine instrument Hannelore had used and attempted to channel mana into it so that I could make one of my own. Her mana had repelled mine, and we had ended up shrieking a little from the impact.

“That’s right,” I declared, overflowing with pride. “In fact, I have plenty of experience with it.”

Hirschur froze for a moment, blinked several times, then muttered, “You do...?” I must have said something strange.

“I shan’t ask any more questions, for both our sakes,” she eventually said. “The potion reduces the resistance one would usually feel and makes it easier to dye another’s mana. A beverage mixed with this potion is normally imbibed before a couple retires to the bedroom.”

To prepare their hearts for accepting another person’s mana, a man and woman getting engaged would trade feystones containing their own mana and wear their partner’s against their skin. Unlike charms, the stones would consistently leak mana.

“I see. That’s... interesting?” I replied. “Wait, hold on.”

Umm... Has Ferdinand dyed me with his mana, by chance?

Hirschur had more or less dismissed my suggested use for the potion, but he had definitely used one when peering into my memories. Maybe that explained why I’d been baptized with elements when Dirk hadn’t, even though we were both children with the Devouring who hadn’t inherited any from our parents.

Can I not get married anymore?! Like, mana-wise?!

“U-Um, Professor Hirschur... This may be a foolish question, but is the potion only ever used once? That is, once your mana is dyed, does it remain that way

forever?”

My question was met with a look of complete exasperation. “Lady Rozemyne, what are you saying? Having one’s mana dyed somewhat through the use of a potion will not prevent it from eventually returning to its normal color. The new mana made within you always takes its natural form.”

Married couples would end up with exceedingly similar mana during their lovey-dovey stretch of nonstop dyeing—but when their honeymoon phase ended, their influence on one another would steadily fade. Once the wife became pregnant, it was best for the husband to regularly channel mana into her so that he would also influence the baby’s mana. That was probably one reason why it wasn’t a good idea to take another wife when one of them was already with child.

“I see... So one would simply have to wait. That is good to know.” Then, without a second thought, I asked, “How does one’s mana flow after they drink the potion?”

This time, Hirschur gave me an exceptionally displeased frown. She rubbed her forehead, then let out a heavy sigh and said, “Lady Rozemyne... Save such questions for Lady Elvira or Lady Florencia when you return home. Your appearance would suggest you are still too young to learn about such things, but I suppose you *are* at an age when you need to hear them.”

Aah, sex ed. I mean, she did say that couples take the potion before retiring to the bedroom. There’s bound to be some elaborate ceremony or another involved, as is always the case with nobles, but I get it.

I understood at once, but still—I probably shouldn’t have asked in the first place. Everyone in earshot was averting their gaze, clearly feeling awkward. Some couldn’t even muster the courage to come forward when they finished their brew.

S-Sorry... I’ll be more careful next time.

I returned to my table, where the atmosphere was just as uncomfortable.

“Rozemyne, how have you already experienced mana resistance?” Wilfried demanded. “Tell me who you experienced it with.”

“Hm? Lady Hannelore.”

“LADY HANNELORE?!”

A buzz ran through the class, and all eyes fell on Hannelore. She recoiled at the sudden rush of attention, then regarded me with anxious eyes. “Lady Rozemyne, I am unsure what you are referring to...”

“Don’t you remember? It was during our joint research, when we were discussing how to pass on divine instruments. I poured my mana into your instrument, then your mana repelled it.”

“Aah, *then...*” Hannelore replied with a smile, nodding her understanding. “You only channeled a tiny amount of your mana, and while it surprised me, my own was entirely unaffected. You may rest easy—that was not what Professor Hirschur meant.”

Everyone else went back to work, either grumbling or looking thoroughly disappointed. The spicy drama that had caught their attention had ended up being neither spicy nor dramatic.

“Rozemyne, you seriously need to work on how you phrase things,” Wilfried griped. “That was so misleading. You made it sound as if you drank a potion so that I could dye your mana.”

“Oh, I see...” I replied, looking back on the situation. Neither one of us wanted to spread a misunderstanding like that when our engagement was destined to be canceled.

Wait, why wasn’t he worried about his own mana?! Wasn’t one of those potions involved when Sylvester looked into his memories?!

That was when I realized something important—plenty of people in Ehrenfest had drunk that potion. It wasn’t just Wilfried and me.

“I sincerely apologize for misleading the class,” I said. “But in my defense, there are people all around me who have imbibed that potion. Was I not right to be worried about what might happen to their mana?”

“All around you?”

“I shan’t mention them by name, but there were quite a few children who

used it between last winter and spring. Remember? It would concern me if that had a long-lasting impact on their futures, especially after their innocence was proven.”

“You make a good point...” Wilfried replied, then fell into thought.

“Plus, even though it was part of their jobs, the knights who had to synchronize with criminals had a heavy burden to bear...” I said, remembering how they had grimaced at their duty. Using the magic tool meant the flow of mana had been entirely one-sided, but it was still deeply unpleasant.

“You don’t need to worry about that kind of thing. The potion doesn’t last very long. At most, it would have taken a month for the influence to disappear entirely.”

“I see. So everyone’s mana is fine, then.”

Just a month? Hah! I was worried for nothing.

The thought that Ferdinand might have permanently dyed my mana had caused me to panic, but everything was fine. It was also good to know that Matthias and the others wouldn’t encounter any lasting issues as a result of their interrogators having dyed them.

I’d committed some embarrassing faux pas during my brewing class, but today was a new day. I attended my written lesson in the morning before heading to my archduke candidate class in the afternoon. There, I found a stand in front of my desk, which was right beside Hannelore’s.

“Hello again, Lady Hannelore.”

“I am always glad to be beside you in class, Lady Rozemyne. You are a fount of useful advice.”

As we exchanged pleasantries, Eglantine entered as our professor.

Hm...?

Her graceful, dance-like steps, gorgeous blonde hair, peaceful smile, and unfaltering orange eyes were all exactly as I remembered them... but there was something strange about her. She seemed so much prettier than before. Maybe

it was her overflowing vigor or her relaxed posture. I couldn't say for sure, but all eyes were naturally drawn to her.

"It is good to see you all again," Eglantine said. "The models shall now be brought in."

On cue, several assistants brought models into the room and set one down on each of our tables. A magic tool modeled after a foundation was nestled in pure-white sand, simulating a duchy.

Once we had all received models and the assistants had taken their leave, Eglantine directed us to dye the magic tools before us. Some of the students who had worked tirelessly to dye theirs last year pulled faces and muttered, "Again...?"

"Yes, indeed," Eglantine replied. "We could not possibly ask you to sustain your box gardens outside of term time, so each year, you will need to redye them from scratch."

This certainly was more mana-efficient, but the students who barely had enough mana to be counted as archduke candidates didn't seem to care about that. They stared at their boxes in vexation.

"Anyone who hesitates to dye a magic tool of this size will never become an aub," Eglantine said frankly. "A true foundation is larger, and considerably harder to dye and maintain."

Archduke candidates strove to become aubs, so we really needed to be able to dye a model this small, but several of us were at a clear disadvantage. Under better circumstances, some of the people in our class—namely those from lesser duchies or from the mana-deprived duchies that lost the civil war—would have been demoted to archnobles, but their territories needed *someone* to supply them with mana.

"Now then—you may begin," Eglantine announced.

I formed my schtappe, touched it against the magic tool, then started channeling mana into it. The white sand turned into dark earth, from which sprouts began to surface.

"You are as quick as ever, Lady Rozemyne. The next step for this term is to

create registration feystones and a replenishment hall for the rest of the archducal family.”

“Understood.”

Only an archduke could create the registration feystones necessary for the replenishment hall. The room had a seven-person limit—there were only as many spots to offer mana as there were primary and supreme gods—but there was no limit to how many feystones one could make. Aub Drewanchel, for example, carried out tons of adoptions, and the duchy’s archducal family was filled with adults. I’d heard from Adolphine that it wasn’t common for minors to supply mana, but they were still registered in case the need arose.

It must be nice to have so many archduke candidates.

“Is something the matter, Lady Rozemyne?” Hannelore asked. “That is quite a stern look on your face...”

“Oh, no, I was just contemplating who can supply their foundation with mana. Truth be told, I envy duchies like Drewanchel that have such large populations. Discounting students, Ehrenfest’s archducal family comprises only three members.”

Hannelore’s expression began to cloud over. “That cannot be easy... Back in Dunkelfelger, my grandmother and grandfather are in good health, as are my uncles. If we include my father’s second and third wives, our immediate family alone contains more than seven adults. And now my brother has come of age as well.”

Next year, the second wife’s child would enroll at the Royal Academy. And they had plenty more underage archduke candidates.

“How I wish we also had such a rich population of elites,” I sighed.

“That said, if a middle duchy such as Ehrenfest is struggling with so few people, Ahrensbach must be in truly dire straits...”

I started. The only adults in Ahrensbach who could supply mana to its foundation were Georgine and Detlinde, who had just recently come of age. I supposed that Letizia could also help out, but she wasn’t even old enough to attend the Royal Academy.

Okay, fine. I'm still mad at them for working Ferdinand to the bone, but I can relate to them wanting all the help they can get. Like, a lot.

As I resisted the urge to let loose a miserable groan, I noticed that my mana had finished filling the box. The feeling was like my flowing blood being turned around and pushed back for a second.

"Professor Eglantine, I am done."

"Then let us make the replenishment hall. Do you have a feystone ready?"

"Yes, and it is already saturated with my mana. I shall now turn it into gold dust. Will this fey paper suffice for the schematics?"

Because I'd studied under Ferdinand, I already knew what to do. I took out the tools I'd been instructed to prepare for class and went over the steps.

"Yes, it will," Eglantine replied. "Draw this magic circle with your stylo."

I turned the feystone I'd brought into gold dust, then glared at the magic circle I would use to make my replenishment hall. It was packed with the sigils of every god, which made it look terribly complex and agonizing to draw.

Can I not copy and paste this?

I tried "selecting" the magic circle with my fingers, but none of my mana came out to cover it. So much for that idea. As much as I adored my copy-and-paste spell, its uses sure were limited. I accepted defeat and got to work with my stylo.

Tch. Serves me right for trying to have some fun.

By the time I'd finished drawing the magic circle, Hannelore had finished dyeing her box. She was currently holding and channeling mana into her feystone, trying to turn it into dust.

"You made short work of that magic circle, Lady Rozemyne," she observed.

"I would not say that," I replied. "The process was time-consuming and very exhausting."

She peered down at my circle. "You drew it exceptionally quickly *and* exceptionally well."

It didn't seem that good to me. From a distance, one could see that several of the sigils were somewhat deformed.

"Do you really think so?" I asked. "Ferdinand regularly scolded me for being slow and not properly balancing my sigils. They were always, in his words, 'not beautiful enough.' I doubt this would even receive a pass from him."

In the case of complex spells, even a slight change in the positioning of the sigils could reduce the magic's performance. Because this circle was drawn using a stylo, I'd needed to redo it again and again before Ferdinand was satisfied.

"That sounds even harsher than Mother's tutoring..." Hannelore said, looking surprised. As it turned out, Dunkelfelger's first wife was strict as well; I couldn't help but give a little chuckle.

"Ferdinand may be a harsh tutor, but one can eventually figure out the limits of his expectations. From there, it becomes much easier—and quicker—to eke out a pass. You need only find those limits with your mother—and take care not to exceed them too much, lest the bar be raised even higher."



Hannelore balked, then sighed. “You remain surprisingly at ease even under strict tutelage, I see...”

Hm? “At ease”? Not even close! Studying under Ferdinand is agony. I spend most of my time wishing I could read instead.

My studies were such hard going that I was seldom able to enjoy one of my books. But to everyone else, it seemed as though Ferdinand afforded me all the time in the world.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Eglantine said, “make your replenishment hall when you are ready.”

“Right.”

I used something similar to an *entwickeln* to create magic tools for supplying mana, then connected them to the foundation. By the time I was done, I’d made seven contribution feystones in total. I’d already made them once before during a tutoring session, so I was pretty sure there was nothing wrong with them.

That’s all, I guess?

I turned in my work, which Eglantine received with a wide-eyed stare. “This is quite wonderful,” she said.

Thanks to Ferdinand, I’d managed to complete my replenishment hall sooner than expected—but it was precisely because I pulled ahead of everyone else that annoying extra work such as the Dedication Ritual ended up being dumped on me.

“From here,” Eglantine continued, “I shall teach you how to make citizenry medals, as well as how to register and dispose of them. But we are out of time, so that can wait until next time.”

In the blink of an eye, my mood darkened. To “dispose of” someone’s medal was to bring about their immediate death. I was reminded of the executions Ferdinand had carried out in Hasse. Eliminating criminals who attempted to flee punishment, such as the former Giebe Gerlach, was a necessary evil, but it still didn’t feel right to me.

Remembering those executions makes me sick to my stomach...

In class, we would simply be registering medals with mana from feystones, then disposing of them all together. Had I not witnessed those harrowing events in Hasse, I probably wouldn't have thought twice about this... but the sight of the crumbling feystones reminded me of that day. It sickened me and sent me into a depression for quite a while afterward.

It's fine. They're only feystones. There's nothing to be scared about. Nothing at all.

The bell signifying the end of class then rang. As everyone busily cleared away their things and exited the room, Eglantine called me over with a smile. "Lady Rozemyne, would you mind staying a moment? There is something I wish to discuss with you."

"Of course, Professor Eglantine."

Wilfried and Hannelore also made to leave, though they shot me several concerned glances as they went. I waved them farewell; then, when the assistants had taken away the boxes, leaving only Eglantine and me in the room, I got straight to the point.

"So, what do you wish to discuss?" I asked.

"You said that something might occur during the Dedication Rituals, did you not? To what were you referring? I would ask for the details."

That was almost verbatim how she had responded to my ordonnanz. I explained that I didn't have any more information to give.

"So you know that something will occur but not what that something might be?"

"Indeed. As you know, the Grutrissheit requires prayer. One must create the necessary pillars of light, then pray at the Royal Academy's various shrines."

Eglantine nodded. The ivory slates in the underground archive also noted that one had to pray while circling the shrines here at the Academy.

"And," I continued, "the chapel in the Farthest Hall is a place of prayer. I simply expect *something* to happen when everyone gathers together as part of

the Dedication Rituals.”

“But nothing happened when we performed it last year,” Eglantine replied, a quizzical expression on her face. Sure, we’d seen a pillar of red light, but that wasn’t out of the ordinary here at the Royal Academy. I could only hope that this year’s rituals would be just as uneventful.

“Last year, the Sovereign temple refused to assist us. We also surrounded a chalice made from my schtappe instead of using the shrine’s magic tools, so none of our mana reached them. But now the Sovereign temple is going to help us *and* we intend to pray to the shrine.”

Not to mention, that Dedication Ritual had taken place before I’d circled the shrines and caused a giant magic circle to appear in the sky above. There were so many new factors to consider.

“If you still doubt me,” I said, “remember that something unusual occurred when the divine instruments were used for the Starbind Ceremony. I sent you that ordonnanz because I thought you might appreciate some time to prepare emotionally.”

Anastasius had outright told me that he preferred surprises he could prepare for. He had also said that something bizarre was bound to happen whenever I got involved, but that was neither here nor there.

Eglantine giggled. “I shall inform the Zent so that we may *all* prepare ourselves emotionally. That matter aside, a new archduke candidate from Klassenberg enrolled at the Royal Academy this year. She has not yet begun compressing her mana, so she means to attend the Dedication Ritual for mednobles. Lord Wilfried is leading that one, if my memory serves me.”

“Correct,” I replied with a smile. “I would not have managed to perform all three on my own, hence the proposal that my siblings share the burden.”

She smiled in turn—a warm smile, as if she were admiring something sweet. “There can be no mistaking how much your retainers care about you, Lady Rozemyne. During our meeting about the Dedication Rituals, two members of your entourage were very insistent about easing the burden on you.”

Eglantine went on to say that she wanted to invite Lady Gentiane and me to a

tea party before the Dedication Rituals, then asked me to give the fresh-faced student my protection. That last part didn't seem relevant to our joint research, but maybe I was under a misapprehension of some kind.

I could understand being asked to teach her about the Dedication Ritual, but why would a student from Klassenberg the First need protection from Ehrenfest the Eighth? Shouldn't it be the other way around?

"Is there much I can do for her in my current position?" I asked. "Perhaps I could wait until my adoption, when my status will increase."

"Come now, Lady Rozemyne. There is no need to complicate things. All you must do is invite her to a tea party and treat her with kindness."

"Well, if you are sure..." I couldn't imagine a tea party being too much of an inconvenience, assuming we could find the time for it.

Am I ever going to have time to research those magic tools for my library...? I can't think of anything I want to do more, but, well...

"I am ever so glad you accept. Let us make our joint research a fruitful collaboration, Lady Rozemyne."

I cocked my head at Eglantine. "*Our* joint research"? Yes, it was joint research between our duchies, but she wasn't going to be involved, and my only role was to assist Klassenberg.

"I am unsure what you mean," I said. "Is there something Klassenberg hopes to learn?"

"Hm?"

"I know nothing about their intentions. Moreover, Ehrenfest has no need to research the Dedication Ritual any further; we are performing these rituals only because the royal family and a greater duchy demanded our assistance. If there is a topic Lady Gentiane wishes to research, that is news to us."

Eglantine didn't respond; she merely covered her mouth in shock, which confused me even more. There was no mission statement for these Dedication Rituals, nor had there been any meetings other than the one spent scheduling them. I was at a complete loss.

“Last year,” I said, “I was informed that joint research stays within the realm of students and does not require the permission of aubs. However, this collaboration began with a request from your aub and only came to be because you insisted on it. Not even the meetings about the rituals have involved students.”

Eglantine looked at me with a start, but I was speaking the truth. Aside from Lady Gentiane, whom we had greeted during the fellowship gathering, I didn’t know a single Klassenberg student.

“How can we be expected to carry out research when the schedule for the Dedication Rituals was decided without us?” I asked. “We do not even know what they hope to discover.”

I didn’t mind participating in the Dedication Rituals to help the students obtain more divine protections, spread my knowledge of religious ceremonies, and increase the royal family’s mana capacity... but calling it joint research made no sense to me.

“There are many benefits to performing the Dedication Rituals,” I said, “so I wish Klassenberg the best with them. Be warned, though—while Ehrenfest will obey the demands of top-ranking duchies this year, once I am a princess, this one-sided joint research with Klassenberg will end. To be frank, I consider it a tremendous inconvenience that I must waste my Earthday carrying out a rote Dedication Ritual instead of dealing with more pressing matters.”

Just as Eglantine had intervened to make this happen, I would intervene to stop it. There was no point in Ehrenfest getting involved when it meant putting a burden on Wilfried and Charlotte *and* taking valuable time away from the students working hard to secure good grades.

“Does it not benefit Ehrenfest to contribute thusly to the royal family?” Eglantine asked. “Propping up Klassenberg is a fine way to prove your loyalty to Yurgenschmidt.”

Ehrenfest was a winning duchy now, so it was true that we needed to contribute to the country—but there was no obligation for us to help Klassenberg specifically. Plus, was my agreement to enter the royal family not enough? The last thing we needed was to be burdened even more.

“Lady Rozemyne, we cannot hold the Dedication Rituals without Ehrenfest’s support. We do not have anyone who could perform them.” She placed a troubled hand on her cheek. “If you consider it that great an inconvenience, then you should have informed me sooner.”

I met her gaze and shook my head. “By the time I was told about the rituals, they had already been set in stone. At no point was I consulted, so how could I have informed you? Besides, the moment you intervened, they became a royal decree, which is not something Ehrenfest can refuse.”

The royal family’s involvement meant this was no longer joint research between students. It was a peculiar arrangement, to say the least—and not one I was going to play along with.

“If Klassenberg intends to repeat the Dedication Ritual next year, then they should study ours closely and record the process. Perhaps that could be your research theme for this year.”

Wilfried and Charlotte had successfully learned to perform the ritual, and I’d heard that Melchior and the apprentice blues had done excellently during the Harvest Festival. Klassenberg had an entire year to prepare themselves. As long as they were motivated, they would manage.

“Lady Eglantine, please deliver a message to Aub Klassenberg for me,” I said. ““If you dedicate yourselves for half a year, you will be able to perform the ritual yourselves.””

The Royal Academy's Dedication Rituals

The day after my conversation with Eglantine, I passed more of my classes and then returned to the dormitory. I was barely through the door when Brunhilde raced over to me; Klassenberg had apparently asked to discuss our joint research before the upcoming Dedication Ritual. But it was already Sproutday. The ritual was due to be held tomorrow, meaning there simply wasn't enough time.

"What should we do?" Brunhilde asked. "At most, we could make some time for them tomorrow morning. It would need to be while the Sovereign priests are preparing the ritual, though, and it would only be brief."

"Would that not be rude of us?" I asked, consulting Wilfried and Charlotte. Frowns creased their foreheads.

"There are still two more Dedication Rituals after tomorrow," Wilfried said. "I don't see why we would absolutely need to meet before the first one—unless this is just an excuse for them to meet with you, since you're our representative when it comes to religious ceremonies."

Indeed, there was a lot we could go over before the ritual, like how to explain things to the gathered students or how much Klassenberg would need to contribute.

"Weren't your retainers summoned during the fellowship gathering?" Wilfried asked. "I assumed all the details were discussed then."

I shook my head. "They merely covered the steps necessary to perform the ritual. How can this be called joint research when none of the meetings thus far have involved students? I must admit, I would also appreciate the chance to meet those from Klassenberg before we begin. As it stands, Lady Gentiane is the only one I will recognize—and only because we met her during the fellowship gathering."

So I wasn't alone; neither Wilfried nor Charlotte knew the other Klassenberg

students involved with the ritual.

I continued, “Lady Gentiane is participating in Wilfried’s ritual, correct? Should we not see her before then?”

“Hm? I guess we should. But that’s happening... next week, right? Making time before then won’t be easy.”

Wilfried was due to spend the most time with Klassenberg over the course of this Dedication Ritual. He and Charlotte were supposedly performing the ceremony for the sake of my health, so I couldn’t be directly involved.

“In that case,” Charlotte said, “perhaps a short meeting tomorrow morning truly is the best option. If we do nothing at all, Klassenberg might say that we refused to make time for them—even though they were the ones who gave us such short notice. So, for safety’s sake, let us respond. It may be inconvenient, but they can decide whether to accept or refuse us.”

Apparently, it was always better to propose a time, no matter how awkward, than to outright refuse.

“Makes sense,” Wilfried replied. “If they refuse us and say that tomorrow morning is too sudden, then we can schedule it for next week instead. Or if they accept, I’ll go. I’m the one who needs to meet with them, and you’re busy doing all the preparations, right? I’m not sure you’d even have time to deal with them.”

Charlotte nodded. “And as Lady Gentiane is, well, *a lady*, I should go as well.”

“That settles that,” I said. “Brunhilde, inform Klassenberg that we can meet them in the auditorium tomorrow morning—between breakfast and third bell—and that we intend to have a more detailed discussion with them during a future tea party.”

“Yes, my lady. If you would excuse me.”

Brunhilde then took her leave with not just Bertilde and Gretia, but also Melchior’s apprentice attendant. They were all evidently in the midst of being trained.

As we concluded that discussion, Charlotte suddenly looked up. “Oh yes. A

short while before you returned, Sister, a letter from Ehrenfest arrived. One of Melchior's scholars and one of his attendants are going to be participating in tomorrow's Dedication Ritual."

"Hm?"

"Melchior submitted a request for his retainers to experience the ritual in advance of the one to be held in our temple, which Father then approved. They will wear blue robes so that they blend in with your guard knights."

Melchior couldn't send his entire retinue—or any of his guard knights—to the Royal Academy when he was still at the castle. So, as a compromise, he had settled on two young retainers with a good chance of obtaining more divine protections.

"He also had orders for his student retainers," Charlotte continued. "They are to experience the Royal Academy's Dedication Ritual, then finish their classes so they can return home with you for Ehrenfest's ritual."

Upon receiving this order, Melchior's retainers had declared their intention to complete their classes as soon as possible. That was what I'd wanted to hear.

And so came the day of the ritual. I ate my breakfast, then bathed and got my attendants to dress me in my ceremonial High Bishop robes. They weren't meant to be worn at the Royal Academy—especially not this often—but Lieseleta had mastered putting them on me. Bertilde was observing closely so that she could mimic the process later.

"Rozemyne, Melchior's retainers have arrived from Ehrenfest," Wilfried announced.

I turned to everyone wearing blue robes and said, "If we are all ready to go, let us make our way to the auditorium." Hartmut would take the lead as the High Priest, with my adult guard knights, Melchior's retinue, Wilfried, and Charlotte following behind. We were quite a large group. Wilfried and Charlotte also had retainers with them, but said retainers weren't dressed in blue; they were only coming along for the meeting with Klassenberg.

As our robe-clad mass started toward the auditorium, I asked Melchior's

newly arrived retainers about the castle playroom. Their lord was doing a good job of managing it, apparently. In return, I told them about his student retainers.

“During the free time they obtained from passing their classes, the apprentice knights have been studying how to identify and neutralize poisons under Leonore and Cornelius, and participating in other forms of training. The apprentice scholars study temple paperwork and procedures under Hartmut and Damuel, while Brunhilde takes the apprentice attendants here and there. Of course, this will only continue until my return for Ehrenfest’s Dedication Ritual.”

Once I returned to Ehrenfest, there would no longer be an excuse for adults to remain here at the Royal Academy. Still, we were going to put the retainers through their paces until then.

We entered the auditorium and immediately saw people with black cloaks and others clad in blue busily moving around. Those in blue were most likely the Sovereign priests. Hildebrand was also here with the Sovereign Knight’s Order, having once again taken on the duty of opening the door to the Farthest Hall. He smiled when he noticed me.

“Rozemyne. You are early.”

“Oh, but you are even earlier,” I replied. “You are here to open the door even though you are not participating in today’s ritual, correct? The royal family certainly is busy.”

We were exchanging the usual greetings when those from Klassenberg arrived. Lady Gentiane first greeted Hildebrand, then turned to me.

“Lady Rozemyne, I thank you ever so much for accommodating our sudden request.”

“I realize this is out of order, but our personnel are very busy at the moment, so please allow me to introduce them first.” I turned to indicate Hartmut and the others. “Our associates clad in blue robes are retainers of the archducal family here to assist with the ceremony. You will see them again during the ceremonies for the laynobles and mednobles.”

My knights would naturally remain by my side, but Hartmut and Melchior's retainers needed to start preparing with the Sovereign priests.

"The final meetings will now be held with the Sovereign priests," I said. "Does anyone from Klassenberg wish to participate?"

Gentiane glanced at a woman beside her; then several of her retainers followed Hartmut to the shrine. I watched them go before reintroducing Gentiane to Wilfried and Charlotte.

"My brother and sister are going to perform the mednoble and laynoble Dedication Rituals, respectively. They came here today for this meeting. It will need to be brief, but we can have a more thorough discussion at a later date. Has your duchy decided on its research goal for these rituals?"

"There are ancient texts in Klassenberg which we believe relate to old religious ceremonies. To revive them, we plan to study these Dedication Rituals closely and take note of the steps involved. How does that sound to you?"

They believed that by bringing back their ancient rituals, as Dunkelfelger had done, they would make it easier for their nobles to get involved with religious ceremonies in general. This, they hoped, would put Klassenberg in a better position.

I nodded and said, "You have very acute insight. I wish to observe these ancient records, if you would allow me." My ears had perked up at the mention of ancient documents, and now I wanted nothing more than to read them.

Gentiane beamed a pleasant smile. "They are too old to be moved from their current location, but we intend to transcribe them. I shall bring some copies to a future meeting so that you can read them to your heart's content."

Is it just me or is Lady Gentiane a good kid? Like, a really good kid.

"Ehrenfest has also succeeded in bringing back an ancient ritual," I said. "Its power is magnificent. Perhaps we could turn our collaboration into joint research by focusing on that theme of revival, then independently focusing on our own ancient ceremonies." We had already recreated the spring-summoning ritual, so this would allow us to contribute while also minimizing our workload.

Charlotte nodded. "Haldenzel would serve as an excellent example for this

research, Sister. I can be of assistance as I have heard the details from the giebe and the local nobles.”

“I would expect no less from you, Charlotte. Your presence is as heartening as ever.”

We finished our brief exchange and agreed on a theme for our research just as the others finished their preparations for the ritual. The Sovereign blue priests began following Hartmut away from the shrine, at which point he came over to me.

“Everything is ready.”

“I thank you ever so much. You explained the process to everyone, I trust?”

Melchior’s retainers and the Klassenberg students had been observing the preparations. Hartmut must have had his work cut out for him trying to make everything clear to them.

Hartmut smiled, then looked at Immanuel. “The Sovereign blue priests say they wish to observe the ceremony. How should we respond?”

Those from the Sovereign temple had brought their own divine chalice, it seemed, so Immanuel wanted to attend the ritual. Without missing a beat, the Sovereign High Priest began extolling the importance of the divine instruments. Then he segued into a list of reasons why he needed to oversee the ritual, even declaring that he now had a right to participate.

I shook my head. “I need not remind you what happened to the Sovereign blue priests who attended the Archduke Conference’s Dedication Ritual. To prevent that from happening again, I must ask them to stay away from today’s Dedication Ritual for archnobles and archduke candidates. For safety’s sake, only those who are participating are allowed to stay. This rule applies even to guard knights and members of the royal family. If you are truly insistent, bring the Sovereign chalice to the laynobles’ Dedication Ritual.” The mana flow then would surely be weak enough for the Sovereign blue priests to manage.

Embittered, Immanuel picked up the Sovereign temple’s chalice and took his leave.

I went with Wilfried, Charlotte, and Gentiane to the Farthest Hall, whereupon

I checked the statues, red carpet, offerings, divine instruments, and so on. The Klassenberg students did their best to note down everything I was looking at. Then, once I was done, I told Hildebrand that everything was ready so he could contact the royal family. Thus concluded the last preparations for the first of the Royal Academy's Dedication Rituals.

"Lady Gentiane, please return to your dormitory before the participants arrive," I said. If she lingered, she would lose her chance. "Once the ritual is over, I would advise you to consult with them to find out how things went."

Gentiane thanked me, then left alongside Wilfried and Charlotte.

The royal family arrived in the same manner as last time. We exchanged greetings; then King Trauerqual turned to me and said, "I understand this ritual is a burden on both Klassenberg and Ehrenfest. Allow me to express my appreciation that you would cooperate nonetheless."

"It is an honor to be of use to the Zent," I replied. "I see you have brought the same members of the royal family as last year."

Once the royal family had entered, the archnobles and archduke candidates started doing the same—but only after my shield of Wind had given them a pass. In the end, not a single participant was refused. I assumed that, after seeing what had transpired last year, the other duchies had decided not to send those at risk of being turned away.

Students of several duchies thanked me for my input on regenerating their gathering spots and asked me to share with them the most efficient form of prayer for obtaining more divine protections during their graduations. It was nice to see others treating religious ceremonies more positively.

"It is best to pray not for your own sake but for someone else's," I said. "Might I suggest that you and someone you care about start praying for each other?"

"That is easy for you to say, Lady Rozemyne..." one girl murmured, looking downcast. "You have a partner who would give you such a wondrous hairpin. I, on the other hand, am still unengaged."

Nooo! I'm so sorry!

“Um, it need not be a romantic partner. You could pray for your parents, other family members, or even a friend. In fact, it need not even be a person; archducal families pray for their duchies, after all.”

“Friends... I see. I thank you ever so much.” The girl recovered, then followed Melchior’s retainer to her designated spot.

Last year, we had arranged the participants in a donut shape around the chalice, but now we were facing the shrine with the royal family at the front, the archduke candidates behind them, and the archnobles at the back. Only those who had volunteered to participate were gathered this time, but we were no longer limited to scholars; there were knights and attendants here too, resulting in quite the crowd.

Once everyone was inside, the doors were shut, and the ritual could commence. Hartmut began the opening speech, had everyone kneel, then rang his bell. “The High Bishop shall now enter,” he said.

As I made my way toward him, surrounded by my guard knights, a thought ran through my mind: *This might be my first time performing a Dedication Ritual at a shrine with statues of the gods. Even the ones in Ehrenfest are held in the noble section’s ritual chamber, not the chapel.*

I walked the path leading through the gathered students and past the royals, then came to a stop at the very front of the room. My knights were all carrying mana-filled stones, which would ease the burden on them as they knelt with me by the shrine.

My eyes wandered the room; then I exchanged a glance and a nod with Hartmut. He set down his bell, moved next to me, and swiftly knelt. I went down too and pressed my hands against the red carpet.

“I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world.”

At once, our participants repeated the prayer; the students who had taken part in last year’s Dedication Ritual and the adults who had taken part during the Archduke Conference must have explained the process to them. It was a smooth start, to say the least. Light began to illuminate the carpet underneath us before gathering into waves that raced up the shrine.

Today's ritual was being carried out entirely by mana-rich nobles, so the light moved faster than I was used to seeing back in Ehrenfest. It wasn't long before even the shrine was dazzlingly bright.

More and more mana flowed toward the shrine, and the feystones embedded in the divine instruments carried by the pure-white statues began to shine their respective divine colors. It was the first time I'd seen this happen.

"We honor you who have blessed all beings with life, and pray that we may be blessed further with your divine might."

In the blink of an eye, pillars of each divine color shot out of the instruments. They went straight up into the air, curved around one another until they had formed a single mass, then flew away.

Wow, things sure do get flashy when you involve lots of divine instruments.

"Lady Rozemyne, I am nearing my limit," Damuel said, sounding exhausted, as he knelt on my other side. He took his hands away from his feystone and the carpet.

"Thus concludes the ritual," I announced. "Everyone, please remove your hands from the floor."

I didn't expect all the divine instruments to shine, but I'm glad nothing else happened.

A sigh escaped me. The royals must have been relieved too, especially after my warning that something unexpected was going to happen, but they looked more underwhelmed than anything else.

After a short break to rest and drink rejuvenation potions, the students began leaving the Farthest Hall. The royal family drained the mana from the chalice into feystones and gave them to the guards, while the Sovereign priests put everything away.

"Zent Trauerqual," I said, "could some of the mana be given to the library? Professor Hortensia is not working there this year, so I expect it is experiencing a shortage."

"Father, we certainly do not want the library to run out of mana," Sigiswald

added in support of my suggestion. “Please do share some with Rozemyne.”

The Zent agreed without hesitation, at least in part thanks to that great assist from the first prince.

“How shall we have it transported to the library?” Sigiswald asked.

“My chalice will do,” I replied. “*Erdegral*.”

As mana was poured into my newly made chalice, Anastasius shook his head and muttered, “As always, common sense does not apply to you.” The others agreed with him, which made me *very* tempted to protest. I wasn’t the only one who could produce divine instruments with her schtappe.

I shouldn’t rock the boat, though. Starting an argument now would only create problems.

Once my chalice was full of as much mana as we’d donated to the library’s feystone last year, I told my retainers that we were going to see Solange. Leonore sent an ordonnanz ahead of us, while Cornelius and Damuel picked up the chalice. As I recalled, a member of the royal family had needed to oversee our previous donation, so I turned to look at the royals.

“I shall observe,” Sigiswald said upon meeting my eye. I didn’t care who filled the role, so I gave him my thanks, and then we set off.

We made our way out of the auditorium, and the students waiting outside took a quick step back upon seeing us. My retainers were all dressed in blue robes, so maybe onlookers assumed they were from the temple. Or maybe it was just because Sigiswald was taking the lead.

We continued to turn heads as we reached one of the hallways leaving the central building—and that was when I caught sight of the magic circle in the sky above. It was *shining* brightly. I instinctively stopped and stared out the window.

Eep... I knew it. Praying to the shrine in the Farthest Hall really did trigger something.

Mana had filled the magic circle, which now looked ready to activate at any moment. I could guess that one last nudge would set it off.

But what could that final nudge be? Praying one more time?

I desperately wanted a hint of some kind, but without Hortensia and the key in her possession, I wasn't sure we would be able to enter the underground archive.

"Rozemyne, is something wrong?" Sigiswald asked. He had stopped in his tracks and was now giving me a look of concern. "That is quite the frown."

Having deduced that he couldn't see the circle above us either, I shook my head and continued down the hallway. "I am just terribly worried about Professor Hortensia being absent this year. She manages one of the keys to the archive, does she not? Are there any archscholars who could oversee it until she returns?" It was my very subtle way of hinting that we wouldn't be able to enter the underground archive unless the situation was remedied.

Sigiswald gave a conflicted smile. "Raublut had to do a lot of convincing to get Hortensia in the library in the first place. Plus, we only found out about her poor health just before the start of the term. Arranging her replacement will take some time. That said, there have been calls for Gentiane of Klassenberg to be allowed into the Library Committee. To my knowledge, she plans to register as soon as her classes are finished. That should take care of the key."

Well, I *was* worried about Schwartz and Weiss's mana supply. More committee members would also help ease Solange's loneliness, but...

"Will it be possible to enter without any archnoble librarians?" I asked.

"That is not something I can answer without first testing it."

With that, we arrived at the library. Solange and Sigiswald exchanged greetings, while Schwartz and Weiss hopped around me as usual.

"Milady is here."

"Read, milady?"

"Oh my..." I said. "That is a most enticing offer, but I am only here to donate some mana."

Solange smiled warmly. "I am always grateful for your consideration, Lady Rozemyne." Then she guided us to the magic tool serving as the library's

foundation of sorts.

“You received a feystone from Professor Hortensia, correct? Allow me to refill that first. I would hate for Schwartz and Weiss to run out of mana before those of the Library Committee finish their classes.”

“That would be tremendously helpful. I expend most of my mana simply carrying out my everyday duties.”

I took the empty feystone from Solange and soaked it in my chalice. The mana that remained was then poured over the same large feystone as last year. Its rainbow colors grew more vivid, which probably meant it would be fine for the time being.

Aaand that should do it. What a productive day.

Sigiswald was peering at the magic tool with great interest, but I merely sighed and reabsorbed my chalice. It was then that Schwartz and Weiss tugged on my hands.

“Gramps needs mana, milady.”

“Gramps is calling.”

“Oh, right. Professor Hortensia is absent, so nobody is supplying that statue. Professor Solange, would it be acceptable for me to give it some mana?” I’d entrusted the duty to Hortensia when she’d started working here, but something had to be done while she was away. We didn’t want crucial parts of the library to stop functioning overnight.

“If you are able to, Lady Rozemyne, then I would welcome it,” Solange said apologetically. “As a mere mednoble, it is impossible for me to supply all the magic tools on my own.”

She really was having a tough time without Hortensia.

“Prince Sigiswald, I must go up to the second floor for a moment to supply a magic tool,” I said. I’d imbibed a rejuvenation potion after the Dedication Ritual, so my mana levels were doing fine.

“You truly do care about this library...” he said. “To be frank, I did not know you were giving it so much mana.”

I smiled and nodded, then climbed upstairs with my retainers and the shumils. Supplying mana to this “Gramps” person was as simple as approaching the statue of Mestionora and touching the feystones embedded in the Grutrissheit it was holding. And indeed, no sooner had my fingers brushed them than my mana started flowing out of me. I allowed this to continue, unsure how much mana the statue needed, until a magic circle arose clearly in my mind. It began to shine, obscuring my vision.

I squeezed my eyes shut on instinct. Even in the darkness, the circle was clearly visible.

This feels like when I learned to make the divine instruments...

As soon as that thought entered my mind, I felt my body rise up into the air. My eyes shot open as I frantically tried to get my bearings.

“Huh? What?”

For some reason, I was alone, standing in a pitch-dark space.

Meeting Gramps

“Where am I...?”

I gazed around, but there was only darkness. Where had my retainers gone? It was probably best to assume I’d been teleported somewhere on my own.

“I supplied mana to the statue of Mestionora, a magic circle appeared, and then I ended up here...” I muttered. “This is kind of like when I was pulled into those shrines, I guess.”

But even then, I’d at least encountered statues—indications that I should start praying. Here in the darkness, I didn’t know what was happening or what to do.

Getting locked in a library is one thing... but I don’t want to perish in an infinite void of eternal darkness.

I carefully reached out my hands, trying to probe my surroundings. There were no walls around me, meaning I wasn’t stuck in a box, at least. Then I crouched down to feel what I was standing on. There was something hard—a floor of some kind.

“Ah...”

Starting from my fingertips, lines of mana began stretching out across the floor. As they continued to move and expand, I was afforded a better view of where I was standing. Either my surroundings were hidden by darkness that needed to be washed away or my mana was actually *creating them*.

I removed my hands from the floor in shock, but the darkness continued to recede. The most I could do was watch as scenery formed around me in spreading waves. A thick carpet that seemed perfect for absorbing noise spread out underfoot, then suddenly dropped off at a specific point. I was inside a cylindrical building with a spiral stairway that descended along the circular wall.

Once the growing wave reached the walls to my left and right, it began expanding upward instead, creating bookshelves packed tight with books. They

extended all the way to the ceiling before expanding infinitely to the sides. The darkness had shrouded a massive library with books on every wall and a dizzying spiral staircase.

“Eep! What is this place?! A paradise given to me by the gods?!”

My eyes flitted all over the place; this was truly overwhelming. Not once since my arrival in Yurgenschmidt all those years ago had I encountered such a tremendously vast collection of books. Sure, seeing the Royal Academy’s library had moved me, but this dwarfed it. The sight before me now was like a foreign library I’d only ever seen in pictures.

“AAAH! Books! *Books!* From here to there, top to bottom—nothing but books! Gyahahahahahaaaa!”

By offering my mana to the Goddess of Wisdom, I’d obtained entry to a genuine utopia. My appreciation and admiration for Mestionora could no longer be expressed with words alone; I needed to do something much, *much* grander.

“PRAISE BE TO MESTIONORA THE GODDESS OF WISDOM!”

My elation practically erupted into a blessing of epic proportions. Then, with an uncontrollable smile on my face, I bounded over to the nearest bookcase and reached out to stroke one of the countless volumes adorning its shelves.

But instead of touching a luxurious cover, my hand struck the surface of a flat wall.

My mind went blank. I couldn’t pick up any of the books. It was like the shelves were all painted on. I slapped one after another, but there was no way to get any books out.

“NOOO! What treachery is this?! My hopes were raised to extraordinary heights and then crushed to tiny little pieces! This is too cruel. Too cruel! Give me back my special prayer!”

I wanted to give Mestionora a piece of my mind. How could she fill me with such euphoric joy one moment and then put me on the brink of despair the next?

“Art thou one who seekest knowledge?”

“I am!” I shouted, tears in my eyes. “From the very bottom of my heart, I want to read!”

Wait, who said that?!

There was someone else here—which meant someone had seen me act in a way entirely unbecoming an archducal family member. This was bad. Like, *really* bad. I’d instinctively treated this place like one of the divine shrines and allowed my true feelings to bubble to the surface. Cold sweat ran down my back—this truly was a blunder of epic proportions—as I turned around to see...

“Wha...?”

A golden shumil. It was the same size as Schwartz and Weiss, except this one seemed to speak fluently.

“Then follow. Thou who seekest knowledge.”

The golden shumil started down the spiral staircase, and at great speed—it descended at least five steps with each hop. I didn’t know how far down I was expected to go, but I *was* on the top floor of a massive cylindrical library. Attempting the journey on foot would surely be impossible. I carefully looked around, then climbed into my highbeast. That was fine, right? There was nobody else around, after all.

“Where are we...?” I asked as we made our way down. “Are you the ‘Gramps’ person Schwartz and Weiss told me about? I think they said you were waiting or calling for me...”

“This place reflects its visitors’ desires,” the golden shumil replied without stopping or even glancing back at me. “We confirm the will and qualifications of those who arrive seeking knowledge; then we send them on their way. Your will has been confirmed.”

Huh? So this place—this building with books from floor to ceiling—was my most prominent desire? I suppose I did say I would rather be trapped in a library than a pitch-dark void.

Mestionora hadn’t actually been involved, from what I could tell. I silently

apologized for getting unnecessarily excited, unnecessarily blessing her, and then falling into unnecessary despair.

“Oh... So are you Gramps or not?”

“This place reflects its visitors’ desires. We confirm the will and qualifications of those who arrive seeking knowledge; then we send them on their way. Your will has been confirmed.”

“You, um... already said that.”

The golden shumil repeated the same answer no matter what I asked. Perhaps its fluent speech came at the cost of variety.

As it turned out, the library wasn’t actually infinite; we descended maybe three or four stories worth of stairs before we reached the bottom. Before us now was a door decorated with seven feystones.

“Touch the door,” the shumil said. “If you are qualified, it will open.”

I really didn’t want to. Getting blasted away by the door in the underground archive was still fresh in my mind.

“Um, I’m not registered as a member of the royal family...”

“Touch the door. If you are qualified, it will open.”

Attempting to communicate was pointless. So, having no other choice, I cautiously climbed out of my highbeast and approached the door. I made sure to touch it only for the slightest moment, lest it hurt me, but my fears proved unfounded. A single feystone lit up red.

Seems safe...

I touched the door again, this time holding my palm flat against it. The feystones all shone; then the door automatically opened inward, revealing an iridescent film that blocked my vision of whatever lay behind it. I was wondering where it led, still on guard, when the golden shumil came and stood next to me.

“Thou seeker of knowledge, who hast been recognized by the gods. Go forth. That which thou seekest lies beyond.”

“Right! Time to read at last!”

I got back into my highbeast, plunged through the film, and emerged in what appeared to be a rocky cave. An ivory path glowed faintly underfoot, showing me the way forward.

I dashed ahead and soon arrived at an ascending spiral staircase, which was also ivory. It reminded me of when I’d sought my Divine Will as a first-year. Back then, I’d come across an identical staircase leading to the Garden of Beginnings.

“This place feels familiar...” I muttered. “Am I going back to the Garden of Beginnings?”

As I made my way up, my suspicions were confirmed—this really was the same staircase. I was now back in the circular plaza surrounding an ivory-white tree. This was where I’d found my Divine Will when obtaining my schtappe, but there wasn’t anything of note here this time; it was as uneventful as when I’d come for my divine protections class. It seemed to me that nothing was going to change no matter how many times I returned.

The trunk of the massive ivory tree stretched all the way up to the top of the space, where many ivory branches were splayed out. From what I could see, it was stretching toward a large hole, through which sunlight streamed and decorated the ground with shadows.

Well, here I am again, but what am I expected to do? There isn’t a single book as far as the eye can see.

The golden shumil had told me I would find what I wanted, so where were the books? I climbed out of my highbeast and tried searching around the tree.

“Finally back, I see...”

“Hm?”

A voice interrupted my thoughts—but there was nobody else around, was there? I was immediately reminded of my blunder in front of the golden shumil, so I racked my brain for anything embarrassing I might have done. I was pretty sure I was safe.

I mean, I didn’t do anything unladylike, right?

I examined my surroundings, taking care to act more like an archduke candidate... and that was when I noticed it. The tree in the center was slowly morphing into the shape of a person.

“Um, what?!”

The phenomenon was so unexpected that I instinctively stepped away. To be honest, I didn’t have a clue what was happening. It was bad enough that there weren’t any books here, but now I was having to endure these strange goings-on? At this point, I just wanted to leave.

Where’s the exit...?

I’d turned to flee, but the hole through which I’d entered was gone. There was no escape. I was trapped in the circular plaza.

I might not know what I’m looking at, but I do know it’s strange. My warped common sense can’t even begin to comprehend it!

My mind was racing. I really wanted to know whether this kind of thing was normal in Yurgenschmidt, but before I could even hope to get any answers, the tree finished its transformation. Before me now was a tall slender man who appeared to be in his late thirties. He was pale as ivory from head to toe—his skin, his long hair that flowed down past his waist, and even his clothes were blindingly white. The frown lines across his forehead made him look a little high-strung... but maybe that was just because they reminded me of Ferdinand.

Indeed, the tree had taken the shape of a person—but it was still clearly a tree.

“You are late,” the figure said, his eyes closed. “What in the world were you doing? The foundation is running so dry that only a faint layer of mana now covers Yurgenschmidt.”

“I, um... S-Sorry?”

We’d never met before, so I wasn’t sure why he was getting mad at me, but I’d decided to play it safe and apologize; this was no ordinary man, and there was no knowing what he might be capable of. He had said that I was late, so he must have been waiting for me. Maybe he had even summoned me.

“Um, might you be Gramps?” I asked.

“‘Gramps’...? Ah, how long it has been since I was last called that name...”

So I was right. I stared at the ivory man, whom Schwartz and Weiss had previously described as old and powerful. Being careful and polite was definitely the right call.

“Um, Gramps...” I said, somewhat hesitant to address him so casually. “May I ask a question?”

“Allow me to ask one first. Your vessel appears much smaller than the last time you were here. Was a strange curse of some kind put on you?”

“A curse...?” I repeated. I’d wanted to find out more about Gramps, but he’d interrupted my efforts with that unusual question. *Was I cursed...?*

“Your current vessel will not be large enough to hold everything. How bothersome.”

“Would you care to elaborate?”

There were so many things I wanted to ask. My current vessel? Large enough to hold what? Gramps did not answer me, though. Instead, he turned to the hole above us, standing as straight as a board, and said, “Could you give me a helping hand, Anwachs?”

An instant later, blue light began to rain down upon me.

Hm? “Anwachs”? Isn’t he the God of Growth? That was a pretty casual way of addressing hi—

I gasped, torn from my absent-minded thoughts by a sudden, sharp pain. My bones were creaking under the fresh strain placed upon them, while my muscles were crying out as if someone were grabbing and stretching them. My body was starting to change!

“O-Ow! It hurts, Gramps! It hurts!”

“You must endure it.”

“So mean!”

It was bad enough that he’d asked Anwachs to intervene without my

permission; now he was telling me to suck it up? I wanted to complain, but the blue light kept raining down on me, and the pain shooting through my entire body became too intense for words.

All of a sudden, the suspender around my waist meant to keep my socks up started to feel unbearably tight. It was digging into my flesh and making it hard to breathe. Dazed and weeping from the pain, I tore away the belt holding my highbeast feystone and rejuvenation potions, removed my High Bishop sash, and wriggled out of my ceremonial robes. Then I pulled up the skirt I'd been wearing underneath and undid the suspender while loosening my underwear.

I was finally able to breathe again, but that was far from the end of my discomfort; I could now feel something tugging on my scalp. My hair was locked firmly in place with hair gel, which had to be the reason. Unless I washed it out, the pain would only worsen.

"Waschen!" I exclaimed, then started pulling out my hairpins under the rushing water. As the gel quickly lost its hold, the cords came loose and my hair came undone on its own.

Again, I was allowed only a brief moment before the pain returned. My toes were crushing up against the insides of my shoes, which felt unbearably tight all of a sudden. I was able to free my feet in the nick of time, but it wasn't enough; now my socks were getting tight. At this rate, I was going to lose all circulation in my legs.

"Messer!" I said, turning my schtappe into a knife before slicing through my socks in a single swoop. This kind of recklessness was only an option because nobles couldn't hurt themselves with their own schtappes.

Keeping up the momentum, I sliced through the straps on the back of my clothes. They tore open with a dull ripping noise, revealing bare skin. Then the fabric around my arms started to tighten, so I quickly freed my torso of any remaining outerwear. My chest was now larger than it had ever been on Earth, and my underwear was so restrictive that I actually had cleavage, but a few cuts to the material under my arms alleviated the issue. The whole experience made me so relieved that I was wearing bloomers; although they were feeling tighter than before, I wouldn't need to remove them.

Ngh... At least I managed to hold on to some of my dignity... I was dangerously close to ending up naked.

Of course, I was only able to think that because I'd grown up on Earth. From the perspective of a Yurgenschmidt noble, my current predicament was still extremely shameful. This was an unimaginably cruel act to inflict upon a fair maiden.

I mean, I did pray to get bigger... but not like this!

At some point, the blue light finally vanished, as did the pain that had racked my body. I supposed that I'd finally stopped growing. I glared up at the sky from whence the light had come, and that was when my exhaustion truly hit me. It was better than being in agony, at least.

I need a rejuvenation potion...

I chugged a kindness-filled potion, then reached for my ceremonial High Bishop robes. They had been made with my eventual growth in mind, so I assumed they would continue to fit me as long as I released the hems. We had done this to save money in the long term, not in anticipation of such a bizarre situation, but still—I wanted to give my past self a round of applause.

First, I undid the hems. Then I attempted to put on my sash. I couldn't tie it as prettily as Lieseleta and the others, but that didn't matter; my only concern was not having to return home in my underwear.

As a weary sigh escaped me, I realized that the ivory man—he who had asked Anwachs to do this to me in the first place—hadn't moved a muscle. He was still standing bolt upright. I shot him a very stern glare.

"Gramps, you saw me undressed, didn't you?!"

"I see not your form. I see only mana."

Huh?

I was taken aback for a moment, but it was true that his eyes had remained shut the entire time.

"Your vessel has grown, at least," Gramps continued. "You can now hold more than you could before, which is good. *And* you came here via the proper route. I

must commend you for learning some degree of manners.”

“Before”? “The proper route”? Hold on... He must be mistaking me for someone else, right? Is that why he did this to me?!

It was no wonder that we’d ended up in this situation. He hadn’t even looked at me!

“Um, excuse me...” I ventured.

“Hurry up and create your schtappe. Prayers must be offered.”

“Huh? Um, hold on. I think you—”

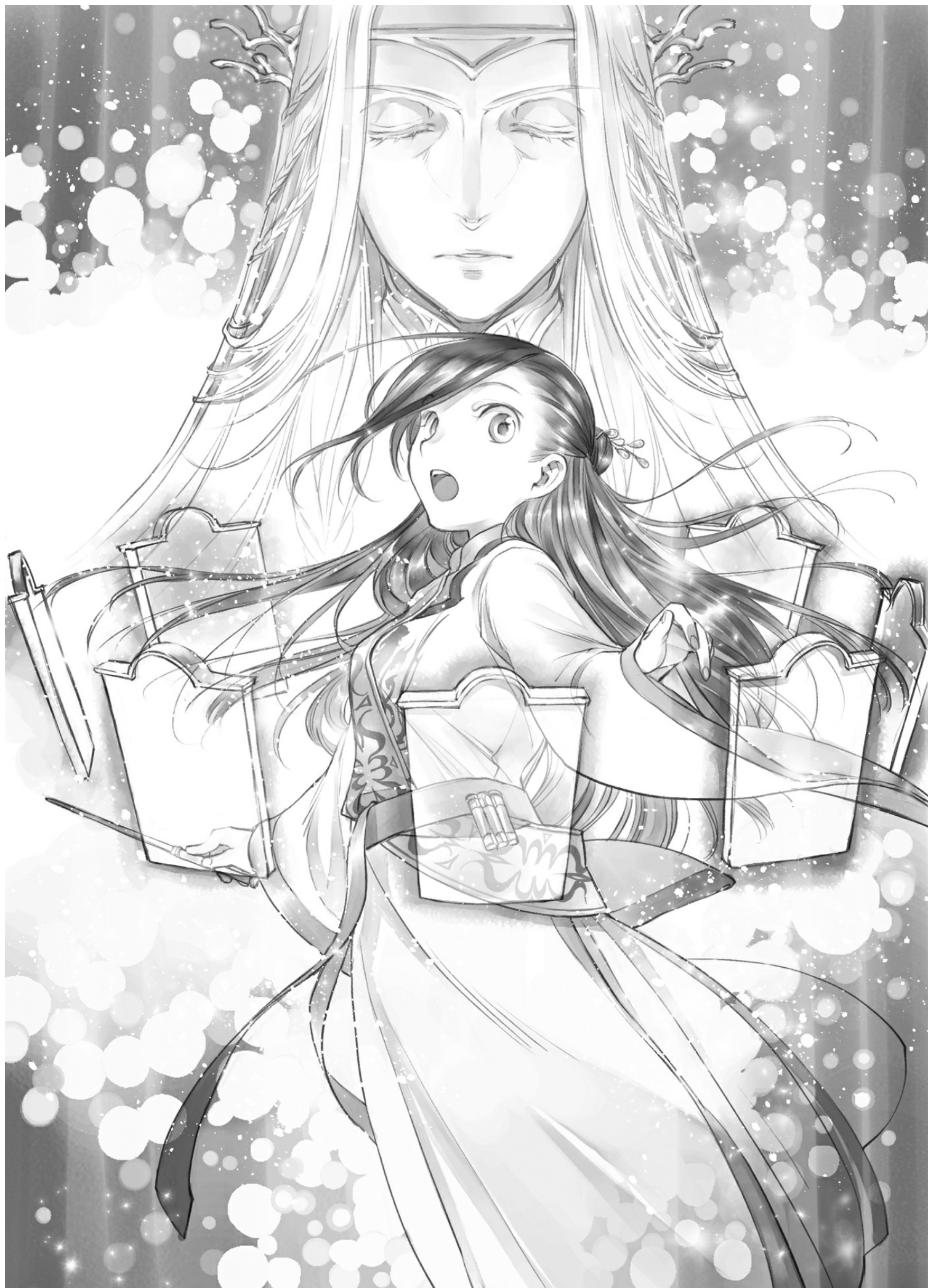
“Yurgenschmidt can wait no longer,” he interrupted, sounding strict all of a sudden. “You must hurry.”

“Understood,” I replied on instinct, then produced my schtappe. Since my arrival in this world, I’d prayed more times than I could count; doing it again felt like a small price to pay to get Gramps to listen to me. But the moment I conceded and took out my schtappe, one divine color after another began shooting from its tip.

“Eep!”

The colors—seven in total—ended up floating in a rainbow circle around me. They hovered at my chest, about a meter in diameter.

The more time seemed to pass, the more vivid each of the colors became. They changed form into seven rectangles, eventually becoming the tablets I’d obtained from the Royal Academy’s shrines during the Archduke Conference.



Straight in front of me was the blue tablet—the first one I’d obtained. The word it had taught me spilled from my mouth all on its own.

“Kraeftark.”

The tablet turned into a thin pillar of light. Then, as if on cue, the remaining tablets rotated clockwise until another one was floating in front of me. It was prompting me to say its word.

“Willedeal.”

The process repeated. A new tablet moved in front of me, I said the name associated with it, then the tablet turned into light.

“Teidihinder.”

“Neigunsch.”

“Tolerakeit.”

“Austrag.”

“Rombekur.”

Once I was done and there were seven lights surrounding me, Gramps slowly looked upward, eyes still closed. I gazed up as well. Because the giant ivory tree had transformed into a much smaller ivory man, the huge hole above us was now fully visible. Through it, I could see a patch of blue sky.

“Pray to the supreme gods and the five primaries,” Gramps said. “From the bottom of your heart, beseech them to let you borrow Mestionora’s wisdom.”

There was no reason to protest, so I did as instructed: I dropped to my knees and prayed to the gods.

“I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world. O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies, O God of Darkness Schicksantracht, O Goddess of Light Versprechredi, O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, O Goddess of Water Flutrane, O God of Fire Leidenschaft, O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, O Goddess of Earth Geduldh, O God of Life Ewigeliebe, hear my prayer. Grant me the wisdom of Mestionora.”

The Book of Mestionora

The seven lights surrounding me shot up into the sky. Then, an instant later, more light started flooding down on me, and fresh knowledge poured into my mind. I tried to repel it at first, but Gramps sharply rebuked me.

“Do not resist,” he said. “Accept it all. Fill your vessel and allow not a single drop to spill. Become one with Mestionora’s wisdom.”

I did my best to loosen up and absorb as much of the knowledge flowing into me as possible, fighting back the urge to protest that it wasn’t in a readable form. This wasn’t the end of the world, I thought; I would just need to turn it into a book myself.

I’m gonna print all this knowledge one day! Bring it on!

I was ready for whatever the light wanted to throw at me—or so I thought. In a problematic development, the gods’ knowledge from the bible started mixing with the apocryphal stories from Dunkelfelger’s history book.

Come on, Rozemyne! Organize it! Organize it! Don’t mix Liebeskhilfe’s pranks with Flutrane’s love stories and a bunch of prayers! Ah, but I now know more about Gramps, at least. He’s Erwaermen, the God of Life’s former subordinate who helped arrange his superior’s marriage to the Goddess of Earth. He looks exactly the same as he did when Yurgenschmidt was founded. Talk about faking one’s age.

A lot of the knowledge flooding into my mind was valuable, but even more of it was miscellaneous trivia. It was all arriving in such a jumbled mess that I could only assume it had never been organized in the first place.

Aah! Now I understand why transcriptions are so important! No wonder our distant forebears found it necessary to put the knowledge a Zent would need on stone slates or pass it down through the bible. All this trivia is useless without some kind of a search function!

All sorts of critical intelligence shot into and then out of my mind: how the

first Zent made the duchies' foundations, the role of the temple at the time, details regarding the bibles given to High Bishops, that the Zent performed Mana Replenishment all across Yurgenschmidt while circling the country gates, and...

Wait! Stop flowing! That bit seemed really important! It might let Lady Georgine steal Ehrenfest's foundation!

"Do not think," Erwaermen said the instant I tried to backtrack. "Accept it all; otherwise, you will end up spilling some."

As seriously urgent and seriously important as that information had seemed, I wasn't allowed to dwell on it; doing so would prevent new knowledge from entering my head. My mind needed to be blank to make space for everything.

It's surprisingly hard not to think about anything—especially when something so important just seized my attention.

How was this abundance of valuable information going to be of any use to me when I couldn't slow down to work my way through it? "The Grutrissheit" was whatever physical form a Zent candidate gave to the knowledge bestowed upon them, but surely I would still need a search function to navigate it all.

Hm...?

Following the biblical stories and information about the temple was a history of the country's Zents. There were gaps, though. For some reason, Yurgenschmidt's past was coming to me in pieces.

To give an example, I glimpsed a bedridden Zent giving his Grutrissheit to his son and trusting him to open the country gates. Then there was an abrupt cut, and the next thing I saw was another prince mortified that his Grutrissheit had disappeared. I couldn't tell whether the two scenes were from the same era, much less whether they were connected in some way.

The entire experience was like trying to watch a video with spotty Internet or trying to watch TV while someone else kept changing the channel. In any case, it was unpleasant and deeply frustrating.

Worst of all, the gaps started appearing in other places too. A ritual made by a later Zent to enrich duchies and a portion of the magic circle created for it were

covered in black splotches, as were some of the rituals and magic circles I'd seen in the underground archive.

Gaaah! I'm not resisting anymore, so show me everything! Give me a clear view! I'm really curious now!

But my desperate plea went unanswered. The light raining down on me vanished, and the information streaming into me suddenly stopped. My mind was saturated with knowledge, as though I'd just consumed an entire stack of books, and the sensation left me somewhat lightheaded.

"Well done," Erwaermen said. "You may rest."

"I shall, thank you," I replied. Then I pretty much collapsed. The world around me was spinning so ferociously that even sitting down was unbearable, so I scrunched my eyes shut and pressed my head against the ground.

Trying to organize my thoughts felt like an insurmountable task. Still, looking at all the knowledge I'd received, I could instinctively tell that somewhere between thirty to forty percent was missing.

Was I unable to absorb it all, then?

I'd certainly tried to. Maybe my vessel or what have you hadn't been large enough and some of the knowledge had spilled out. That was disappointing.

"Um, Erwaermen..." I said. Should I have used a divine title of some kind to address him? "Why does Mestionora's knowledge contain so much information about Zents and aubs but basically none about laynobles or commoners?"

"As those who have schtappes and an adequate amount of mana turn into feystones, their knowledge is added to Mestionora's wisdom."

So she gathered the memories of the country's Zents and aubs only when they died... That explained why there hadn't been much information from after the purge and why there hadn't been any at all about commoners.

I wasn't sure how long I'd spent on the ground; all of a sudden, I simply regained consciousness. I opened my eyes and sat up, holding my still-spinning head. Part of me wanted to sleep for a while longer, but I couldn't stay here

forever; as far as my retainers were concerned, I'd suddenly disappeared while supplying mana to the statue in the library. They must have been worried sick.

I picked up my hair ornaments, which were scattered across the ground, and quickly fixed my hair with my rainbow hair stick, as I'd always done in my commoner days. I doubted it would stay in place without gel, but this was better than nothing.

"Erwaermen, I came here to read," I grumbled. "Not only were there no books, but the knowledge bestowed upon me was full of gaps. This is incredibly disappointing. The biggest disappointment of my life, even."

I pulled on the belt holding my highbeast feystone and rejuvenation potions, then stuffed what remained of the socks I'd sliced open into one of my bags. I couldn't just leave it all. Then I momentarily removed my High Bishop robes. I'd recalled that light feystone armor pretty much eliminated the need for a bra or any other supportive undergarments, so I formed some over my underwear.

Aah, this feels good...

Now I could start getting dressed again. I'd severed the back straps of my clothes in my rush to be rid of them, but that was fine; a few cuts from the armpits to the upper arms made them wearable again. My new height meant the dress now looked more like a high-waist one-piece, and the cut straps left a truly shameless hole, but there was no other way for me to fill out my High Bishop robes and make sure the necessary lace was showing through the sleeves and such.

Once that was done, I put my robes back on. I carefully retied the sash, which made me look reasonably well-dressed. Nobody would be able to tell my clothes were in tatters underneath.

All that remained were my feet. I'd only ever practiced turning feystones into shoes that matched my armor in class, but this was better than exposing my bare feet. My ceremonial robes were long enough to hide them, in any case.

"You are the first person to express disappointment after obtaining Mestionora's wisdom..." Erwaermen remarked. "You received the rest before, did you not? You need only combine them."

The blood drained from my face, and the half-morphed feystone slipped from my hands. *Gah, that's right! He's mistaking me for someone else!*

"Um, in truth..." I said, "this is our first meeting. I certainly do not recall any others."

"Surely that is not the case... I could never forget our first encounter."

So he said, but I'd still never seen him before. He seemed adamant that he was right, so I repeated that he was mistaking me for someone else.

"Can you tell me more about the person who was here before me?" I asked.

"They were a fool who knew nothing of manners."

"You will need to be more precise than that. You said they did not use the 'proper route' to get here; how did they arrive, then?" It was some casual chatter while I reformed my shoes and finished getting ready to leave.

The incident in question had taken place over a decade ago, apparently. Someone had visited the Royal Academy's shrines during the latter half of the civil war, created the giant magic circle that hung in the sky above, and then somehow managed to reach Erwaermen.

As it turned out, the massive circle was necessary to obtain the Book of Mestionora, as it allowed Erwaermen to turn from a tree into the shape of a human and communicate with the gods. One could not speak with Erwaermen without first activating the circle, which was why he had remained a tree when I'd obtained my schtappe and when I'd visited again during the ceremony for divine protections.

The person who had come here a decade ago had also met the golden shumil after pouring mana into the statue in the library. That was where our stories diverged, though. This mystery figure had ultimately been turned away for not having activated the giant magic circle, so they had taken action to change that—not by holding a Dedication Ritual in the Farthest Hall, but by blasting it with an immense amount of mana from the sky!

"Then they flew in from above," Erwaermen recalled, looking as rigid as ever as his face turned toward the sky. I gazed up as well; he was evidently confusing me with this bad-mannered individual who had arrived through the hole meant

for communicating with the gods.

“I would never do anything of the sort,” I protested. “You are mistaking me for someone else.”

I mean, I did consider dropping a huge feystone on the circle from above, but I decided against it! I considered the danger!

“Some individuals *do* have similar mana...” Erwaermen said.

A newborn baby and its mother had almost exactly the same mana, as did two lovers experiencing the height of their passion—but this parallel was only temporary. In the case of two parents, the father’s influence on the mother would slowly fade, allowing her mana to return to its usual color, while their child would continue to have the mana it was born with. Even among siblings, there were variations in the amount of mana the father contributed during each pregnancy. They were also likely to obtain different protections based on their deeds while growing up.

“However,” he continued, “even if two people were to have similar mana, it is unthinkable that they would receive the same divine names from the supreme gods. How could you be different people...?”

So my mana was similar to that of whoever had come here before me *and* we had received the same divine names from the supreme gods. That was why Erwaermen couldn’t tell us apart.

“How were you able to obtain your schtappe?” Erwaermen asked. “Someone who is nearly identical to another in these regards should not have been able to acquire one.”

“Hm? That might be because the Royal Academy’s curricula were changed. I received my schtappe in my first year, before I was granted names by the supreme gods. I must have been sufficiently unique at the time.”

If what Erwaermen had said was true, then I’d only been able to obtain a schtappe because I’d made the journey in my first year. Had we followed the old curricula and waited until after we’d received names from the supreme gods, I might have been mistaken for someone else and refused a schtappe entirely.

Whew, that was close.

“I see. Then you are a child marked by Ewigeliebe.”

“What does that mean...?”

“The answer lies among the knowledge you were granted. Form your Book of Mestionora.”

I couldn't help but harrumph in response; Erwaermen had just told me to figure it out myself. As it stood, finding anything in particular among that mountain of unorganized information was impossible. I needed something with a search function.

I produced my schtappe, closed my eyes, and envisioned the Book of Mestionora I'd seen in the arms of the library's statue. The form I desired arose in my mind alongside a magic circle. I already knew which spell to chant; the Zents who'd flooded into my thoughts had shown me.

“Grutrissheit,” I said.

On command, my schtappe turned into the Book of Mestionora. It was much smaller than the divine instrument I'd seen the statue holding—about the size of a standard paperback—and took the shape of an electronic tablet so that I could use its search function.

“That rectangle of mana is rather small,” Erwaermen observed. “Will you be able to read from it?”

“This is the perfect size; anything bigger would feel uncomfortable. I'm looking for the Mark of Ewigeliebe, right?”

I entered the keywords with my fingers. Children with the Mark of Ewigeliebe had mana despite having been born among commoners and came back from the brink of death time and time again, always managing to escape Ewigeliebe's grasp. They ultimately ended up with the mana clumps of a dead person even though they were alive.

I dissolved those clumps with the jureve, but I guess it's true.

Those with the Devouring were faintly omni-elemental, with only one element being the slightest bit stronger depending on where they were born.

To be more specific, the determining factor was the sigil carved into the nearest country gate. In Ehrenfest, that was Wind; in Klassenberg, it was Earth; in Dunkelfelger, it was Fire; in Ahrensbach, it was Darkness; in Hauchletzte, it was Water; and in Gilessenmeyer, it was Light. Those born in the Sovereignty were more likely to have Life as their strongest element.

Incidentally, according to the Book of Mestionora, the sigil of the God of Life was located at the very center of Yurgenschmidt. The country was circular because it was in reality a massive magic circle that acted as a seal to contain his power.

Just how much does Erwaermen resent Ewigeliebe...?

Putting those thoughts aside, I returned to the matter at hand. Children with the Devouring weren't influenced by their parents' mana, which explained why they were born omni-elemental. They needed to make their own color by praying to the gods and obtaining divine protections; if they didn't and married without any affinities, they would instead be influenced by the mana of their partner. Rather than being a mutual exchange, it would end up a one-sided sweep—but even then, their mana wouldn't be completely dyed. Over time, the external mana's influence would fade.

Unless one had the mana clumps of the deceased within them, as was true for those with the Mark of Ewigeliebe. Said clumps were akin to having feystones within one's body—and if someone managed to completely dye them, their influence would not fade much at all. The person who was dyed would end up with mana identical to that of the person who had dyed them, albeit not quite as strong.

So the difference between Dirk and me was that he was a normal Devouring child, whereas I had the Mark of Ewigeliebe.

Dirk's medal was only barely colored, whereas mine was firmly omni-elemental. That made sense, but...

Doesn't that mean my mana really has been dyed?!

It was clear to me now—Ferdinand *had* dyed my mana when searching through my memories back in my blue shrine maiden days. He had used the synchronization potion, which would normally have put us in the same position

as Wilfried and Sylvester, or Matthias's group and the knights in charge of viewing their memories. But because I had the Mark of Ewigeliebe, the influence on my mana had remained. So much for everyone telling me it would only last a month...

Ferdinand completely dyed my mana! Wait, does that mean he was the rude fool Erwaermen has been telling me about?! What on earth was he doing?!

These revelations were coming so suddenly that I was struggling to comprehend them. My head was actually starting to spin.

"Does that description seem familiar?" Erwaermen asked.

"Indeed," I replied with a nod. "It would seem that I am marked by Ewigeliebe. My mana was once dyed, but I am not the person who dyed me. We aren't even the same gender. Shouldn't that be obvious at a glance?"

"Mana has no gender."

What?!

"B-But our voices... and our speech patterns..."

"Could you tell the gender of a beast from its barking? Our communication is possible only because I can read your intentions through the sounds you make."

I didn't want to admit it, but he'd made a good point—I wouldn't be able to distinguish a cat by its mewling.

"The language I speak is not the same as yours," Erwaermen continued. "Were I not using this method to communicate with you, how would we pass on our knowledge or express our wills? You, too, are merely having intent projected upon the sounds I make."

In essence, it was like everything we were saying was being machine translated for each other. Subtle details like feminine or masculine speech were impossible to notice, and any similarities between how Erwaermen and Ferdinand spoke were mere projections based on the comparisons I'd drawn between their expressions.

"Um, Erwaermen... Is there anything an Ewigeliebe-marked child who was dyed before coming of age should know or be careful about?" I asked, not

wanting to experience yet another disaster because of my circumstances.

“I can say nothing for certain about such a rare experience, but I would expect their situation to be the same as that of a child dyed by its parents.”

Not a very reliable answer...

He continued, “The mana of the person who dyed you has become the basis of your own. This will change naturally when you marry and another person starts to influence you. You were dyed by Quinta, I assume?”

I shook my head, having never even heard that name before. “*Ferdinand* was the one who dyed me.”

“That does not make any sense. Come here and touch my form. I will observe your memories.”

I obediently stood up and went over to Erwaermen—or at least I tried to. I tripped over my own feet before I could get very far at all. My body didn’t feel right anymore. I would need to practice before going home, or else I would make a fool of myself.

“What are you doing?” Erwaermen asked.

“I grew so much so suddenly that I’m not used to my new body.”

“I see. Hurry up.”

Come on! You’re the one who did this to me—without even consulting me, might I add. The least you can do is acknowledge my complaints!

My legs wavered, but I eventually managed to reach Erwaermen. My eye level was much higher than when I’d first arrived. I was unsure where to touch him, so I opted just to press my hand against his.

“Indeed, it was Quinta who dyed you,” Erwaermen said.

“Do you mean Ferdinand...?”

“In the same way that your true name is Myne,” he dryly replied. That was evidence enough that he really could read my memories.

Well, I wouldn’t expect anything less from a former god.

As that thought ran through my mind, Erwaermen continued in a murmur:

“This is a convenient opportunity...”

“In what way?”

“The Book of Mestionora is split between you and that fool who intruded on this place with no appreciation for wisdom and resisted the flow of knowledge. You may have the same mana as he, but you came here by the proper means, which makes you better suited to serve as its holder. Seek the lost portion of the Book.”

Erwaermen then began morphing back into an ivory tree. At the same time, the way out of the Garden of Beginnings reappeared, as if urging me to leave through it.

“I don’t know what you mean...” I said.

“Thou who seekest all wisdom—kill the fool and obtain thy missing knowledge from his feystone. Thou shalt become a Zent in the truest sense.”

“Wait! I don’t want to do that!” I shouted, but my words fell on deaf ears; Erwaermen finished transforming and said nothing else.

I now stood alone in the Garden of Beginnings, staring up at the ivory tree. Light streamed through its many branches.

“No,” I said firmly. I didn’t care whether Erwaermen was listening. “I want knowledge to *save* Ferdinand, so why would I even think about killing him? From the bottom of my heart, I want to read all the books in this world, but that isn’t a price I’m willing to pay.”

If all I need is a completed Grutrissheit, there are other ways to get one.

I practiced walking for a bit, looked around to make sure I hadn’t forgotten anything, and then put the Garden of Beginnings behind me.

I'm Back

So... what now?

Upon leaving the Garden of Beginnings, I found myself atop the shrine in the Farthest Hall. Only royals could open this room—and on top of that, it was nighttime.

As moonlight streamed in through the thin, high-placed windows, I fell into thought. I had no idea what time it was right now, so contacting the royal family was out of the question. It was one thing to send them an ordonnanz during dinnertime, but when they were bathing or asleep? Even I understood that it was much too risky.

Lieseleta wouldn't mind, though... I think.

She had come to the Royal Academy as my attendant and would be able to contact the royal family at an opportune time. That was surely my best move.

"This is Rozemyne," I said to an ordonnanz. "I am currently in the Farthest Hall at the back of the auditorium. My apologies, but please contact the royal family—there is no way for me to leave unless one of them opens the door for me. I must also ask you to bring me a hooded cloak when you come to fetch me—one that will cover me from head to toe. I do not wish for others to see me as I am now. Oh, but the cloak must be an appropriate size for an *adult*, not a child. I repeat: an adult!"

I was fairly confident that I'd made my wishes clear. Lieseleta would doubtless arrive with at least one of the royals; I couldn't let them see my loosely bundled hair or the tattered clothes beneath my High Bishop robes.

I swung my schtappe, and the white bird passed through the window en route to its destination.

"Well, that's that," I said, then formed my highbeast and jumped down to the bottom of the shrine. There, I remade the Book of Mestionora and started to read. Because I'd imagined it as an electronic tablet, it shone with a faint light

that made its text easy to see even in this dark chapel.

Aah. Now it doesn't matter how long the royal family leaves me waiting.

Of course, I wasn't reading for pleasure; this was a serious investigation. I'd glimpsed something about stealing foundations, which had reminded me of Georgine's intentions with Ehrenfest. I needed to know more. From what I remembered, I'd started to panic when the focus of my newly acquired knowledge had turned to duchy foundations, as was perhaps obvious.

I ran a search using the first keywords that came to mind, then delved into the history of foundations and the battles that had taken place over them.

Here! This is it! I need to tell Sylvester right away!

The text written in the Book of Mestionora had shaken me to my core. I needed to relay this information to Ehrenfest as soon as possible and prepare for Georgine's attack.

Is there enough time? She might have already made her move.

Last year, she had planned to act at the start of winter—and we had only managed to outmaneuver her thanks to the intelligence we'd received from Matthias and the others as soon as we'd arrived at the Royal Academy. If she was following the same schedule again this year, then her attack would come any day now.

It shouldn't be easy for her to worm her way in now that her collaborators are out of the picture, but who can say for sure?

Our purge last winter had ideally eradicated the nobles name-sworn to Georgine, but there was a chance she had other allies we didn't know about. Unable to sit still, I climbed out of my highbeast and turned it back into a feystone.

"Eep!"

I tried pacing around the shrine but immediately twisted my ankle and fell over. The floor was cold, and the sensation reminded me to cool my head. I crawled over to the shrine and sat down on its bottom step.

Calm down, Rozemyne. You managed to send an ordonnanz to Lieseleta, so

Lady Georgine can't have stolen the foundation yet.

Panicking wouldn't get me out of here any sooner. Ordonnanzas couldn't cross duchy borders, meaning I couldn't send one to Ehrenfest. A magic letter could, but I didn't have one on me. The best I could do right now was learn as much about foundational magic from the Book of Mestionora as I could.

I mean, this is the Grutrissheit the royal family is looking for, so I'll need to be extra careful about who sees it. Now, while I'm all alone, is the perfect opportunity to give it a thorough look through.

In an attempt to calm my nerves, I devoted all of my attention to the Book. I was only drawn back to my senses when a bright flash came from the chapel door. At once, I stood and turned to face it; they had come to get me sooner than expected.

A group of several people entered, with Sigiswald and Hildebrand at the very front. Behind them and their retainers were Lieseleta, Cornelius, Matthias, and Gretia.

"Lady Rozemyne!" Lieseleta exclaimed. She rushed over with a folded cloak in her hands and a look of sincere concern on her face.

"I see you brought what I requested," I replied. "Thank you ever so much, Lieseleta."

She wrapped the cloak around me with some help from Gretia. "I am glad to see you safe. We were truly worried."

"Lieseleta, Gretia—my apologies, but could you keep these shoes and tattered clothes hidden from the others?" I asked in a quiet voice.

Gretia swiftly retrieved them under the guise of adjusting my sleeves, then enveloped them in some cloth she'd brought. That would save me a lot of embarrassment.

There we go. I handled this perfectly, didn't I? Heh.

After confirming that the slightly oversize cloak was covering me from head to toe, I took Cornelius's hand and slowly approached the others. His escort meant I wasn't likely to fall over again, but I wanted permission to use my highbeast

anyway. Better safe than sorry.

Having carried out their duties, Lieseleta and Gretia moved to stand behind me, conscious of all the eyes on us. Meanwhile, Cornelius and Matthias waited on either side of me.

The next thing I knew, Hildebrand was standing in front of me. “Rozemyne, why are you...?” he said, looking up at me in shock. We’d stood at practically the same height before my disappearance, but now I was more than a head taller than him. It made me realize just how much I’d grown.

“I visited the Garden of Beginnings, where His Divinity Erwaermen asked Anwachs the God of Growth to make me, well... *grow*,” I explained.

“The Garden of Beginnings?”

Hildebrand clearly had so many more questions to ask, but I didn’t have time to answer them. I said, “*Rucken*” to get rid of my Grutrissheit, then carefully made my way over to Sigiswald. His eyes were so much closer to being level with mine.

“Prince Sigiswald, I do not wish to inconvenience you, but can we discuss the details of my absence during the Archduke Conference? I must return to Ehrenfest at once to speak with the aub.”

Sigiswald gave me permission to leave *and* use my highbeast, which was good. I still wasn’t used to seeing the world from so much higher up, and while some shin-length robes wouldn’t have been too bad, trying to travel on foot in low-hem ceremonial attire was far too dangerous. I climbed into my single-person Pandabus, ignoring the looks I was getting from the royals, who clearly weren’t ready for our conversation to end, and returned to the dormitory.

“Cornelius, Lieseleta, where is everyone...?”

I’d expected the dormitory to be alive with bustling students, as it always was. Instead, I was met with darkness and an eerie silence. I couldn’t help but look around in shock.

“They have returned to Ehrenfest,” Cornelius replied. “This year’s graduation ceremony came and went.”

“You were absent for an entire season, Lady Rozemyne. We were so very worried.”

“What? An entire season...?” The academic term was over, and we were now almost in spring. From my perspective, it had only been a day or two at most.

“Might I ask when you intend to join them?” Lieseleta asked. “It is almost seventh bell, so there will not be time to return today. If you need a few days to rest, that can easily be arranged.” She was hinting that she could delay sending word to Ehrenfest, but I shook my head; I needed to get back as soon as possible.

“Cornelius, Matthias—contact Ehrenfest,” I said. “I shall sleep in the dormitory tonight and return home tomorrow, assuming there are no issues. I am hungry and exceptionally tired.”

“A lot must have happened over the winter to make you grow this much,” Cornelius remarked. “Take as much rest as you need, Rozemyne.” He then reached out to me, intending to pat my head, but stopped short. I’d changed so much that he was starting to question whether the gesture was still acceptable.

I pulled off my hood, then grabbed his hand and placed it on my head. “It was exhausting. Please pat my head, dear brother.”

“You need to hurry and grow up on the inside too,” Cornelius replied. He was wearing a conflicted expression but ultimately conceded.

In the meantime, I asked Gretia to head to the kitchen and get Hugo to prepare a meal for me.

“Hartmut is gonna lose his mind when we get back tomorrow...” Cornelius muttered with a grimace. Then he waved me away and said, “You should go rest for now.”

I nodded, then went with Lieseleta to my room, where I got rid of my highbeast and removed my cloak. Gretia arrived with my food a short while later but froze the moment she saw me. Because I was taller now, I could no longer see under the bangs covering her blue-green eyes.

“My apologies, Lady Rozemyne,” she eventually said. “It might take me a while to get used to the new you.”

Before, I'd always needed to look up at Gretia, but now I was her height—or perhaps just a tiny bit shorter. I really had shot up.

Mm, but I'm still not as tall as Lieseleta...

"Still," she continued, "what actually happened to you? Hartmut was declaring nonstop that you were getting taller, but I never expected such an extreme growth spurt."

"Indeed," Lieseleta added with a nod. "You were so small and adorable before, but now you look so beautiful and grown-up."

I sighed. "Erwaermen told me my vessel was not big enough for his needs, then got Anwachs the God of Growth to make me like this. The process was excruciating..." I said, removing my ceremonial robes to reveal the tattered clothes beneath. Lieseleta and Gretia widened their eyes in surprise.

"You outgrew even your socks...?!" Lieseleta cried, unable to believe what she was seeing. "How could anyone allow that to happen when you had no change of clothing or any attendants present? And... is Anwachs not *male*?!"

"I consider it wonderful that you have grown so beautiful," Gretia proclaimed. "At the same time, though, you have been looking forward to this for ages. That he would tarnish the memory is unforgivable."

It was nice that they both shared my helpless anger at the gods.

"To be honest, Gretia, seeing that we are the same height made me appreciate how much I've grown," I said. "Before, there were no mirrors I could use or other people I could draw comparisons to, so I didn't feel changed at all."

I'd been in so much pain and so desperate to look presentable that I hadn't stopped to admire my new appearance. Now that I had a mirror, though, I could see that I'd turned into a very attractive young woman. I almost couldn't believe it. Unless I started paying more attention to how I acted, I would probably end up being seen as an even greater waste of beauty than Angelica.

"Still, were your actions earlier wise, Lady Rozemyne?" Lieseleta asked nervously while helping me remove my clothes. "You prioritized Ehrenfest over the royal family..."

That didn't really concern me. Hildebrand and Sigiswald had both given me their permission, even if only because I'd scrambled their brains with my sudden change of appearance. I didn't expect there to be any issues.

"The royal family allowed it, so I don't believe we have anything to worry about," I said. "I am more concerned about Ehrenfest—and in any case, my clothes were in tatters. I do not have an outfit for tomorrow, let alone for a formal sit-down with members of royalty."

Preparing the clothes necessary for the meeting at such short notice would never have been possible. Even when I returned to Ehrenfest, I would need to wear my High Bishop robes until we could order new clothes for me.

Lieseleta and Gretia exchanged a look, then went into my clothing room. They returned a moment later with some clothes that were the perfect size for an adult.

"Hartmut was so insistent that you were growing that Brunhilde left several of her outfits here for you," Lieseleta explained. "I should also note that we have contacted the Gilberta Company and asked them to halt any commissions they are currently working on for you."

From the moment I'd disappeared, Hartmut had apparently started telling everyone that Mestionora had summoned me. He'd spent each day in a dreamlike trance, narrating how my mana was growing. Everyone in the dormitory had ended up less worried about me and more concerned about how to shut him up.

What the heck? That's more than a little scary...

"We were skeptical," Lieseleta continued, "but Hartmut spoke with such overwhelming confidence, and the others name-sworn to you told us they could also feel that you were growing. So we made a few preparations."

Lieseleta then looked to Gretia, who nodded and said, "I am enveloped in your mana, Lady Rozemyne, and could sense that it was growing stronger. I saw it as evidence you were alive. Though, um... unlike Hartmut, I did not think it meant you were *physically* growing..."

There were several reasons why I was borrowing from Brunhilde in particular.

Her clothes had been made in the same style as my own, which meant they had easily adjustable lace at the back. They were winter clothes she had ordered since being engaged to the aub, so they were both trendy and appropriate for someone of my status. And on top of all that, because she had come of age, there was nothing wrong with her leaving them here at the Royal Academy.

“You will need to get remeasured and order new clothes upon returning to the castle,” Lieseleta noted. “But until then, these should serve you well.”

“I am shocked,” I said. “Truly shocked.”

I changed into some adult-size undergarments, donned some light feystone armor, then put on Brunhilde’s clothes. They were a bit too long for me and tight around the chest, but we could always hem them up and relax the lace on the back to give me more room.

During my absence, Lieseleta had spent her free time preparing undergarments for me. Because I was going through a growth spurt, she’d determined that I couldn’t have enough.

“Your shoes must naturally be made to suit your feet, so you will need to make some from feystones for now.”

“That is fine. I can definitely spare the mana.”

Once I’d eaten dinner, I took a bath. Lieseleta and Gretia used that opportunity to tell me what I’d missed during the academic term. The laynoble and mednoble Dedication Rituals had concluded without incident, and anyone who’d inquired about my sudden absence had been told that I’d taken ill. Hannelore had apparently been extremely worried about me by the end of the term and even sent me some books as get-well presents.

As for my retainers, Hartmut and Damuel had transcribed the documents we’d received from Klassenberg. Then, during the Interduchy Tournament, the fey paper we’d made had been delivered to Ferdinand. Matthias hadn’t been able to decide on a partner to escort for his graduation, and the children of the former Veronica faction had united in serious discussion to decide what to do.

“Matthias ended up escorting Ottilie,” Lieseleta informed me. “As someone without parents, he struggled to find a partner from another duchy. He might

have been able to escort Gretia or Muriella, but there was not enough time for them to prepare clothes.”

Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined that Matthias would escort Otilie. He was a handsome fellow and a fine noble, so I’d assumed that he would easily nab a girl or two. As it turned out, there were so many things I’d needed to do in place of his parents.

“I am a failure of a lady... How can I apologize to him?”

“There is no need, Lady Rozemyne,” Gretia said firmly. “Matthias never intended to find someone to escort, as he was the son of the previous Giebe Gerlach and already knew he would go with you to the Sovereignty. If he had wanted a partner in a situation similar to his own, he would have needed to act much sooner.”

Even a normal student would need to find a partner, introduce them to their parents, and meet their partner’s parents at the Interduchy Tournament—assuming they were from another duchy. And that was just the beginning of the groundwork that would need to be laid in time for their graduation. Gretia was adamant that if Matthias had wanted to escort someone else, it was his own fault for not having introduced me to anyone sooner.

“Laurenz saw Matthias’s situation and took it as a warning that he would need to begin his own preparations as soon as possible,” Lieseleta said. “But let us leave our discussion there for today. There is much for you to do tomorrow, is there not?”

I certainly was tired, so I obediently climbed into bed. Tomorrow was going to be a busy day.

After breakfast the next morning, I got everyone to pack their things in preparation for our return to Ehrenfest. My guard knights didn’t have much luggage with them, since they’d only been staying at the Royal Academy in shifts, but Lieseleta and Gretia hadn’t left since my disappearance.

“Please accept my apologies, both of you,” I said.

“It is quite alright, Lady Rozemyne,” Lieseleta replied. “It would not have

made sense for us to stay in the castle without our lady there.”

Ottilie could gather intelligence in the castle on her own, which had allowed Lieseleta and Gretia to stay in the dormitory. The scholars hadn’t been able to join them because they had work to do in both the castle and the temple, while the knights had training to partake in.

Once everyone was ready to go, we started toward the teleportation hall. Because of a rather embarrassing display while getting changed, I was in my Pandabus once again. I’d managed to bump into everything within my reach and subsequently fall over in front of my two attendants. Not wanting me to navigate the stairs in my current state, they had advised that I use my highbeast.

“A welcome party is already waiting for us in Ehrenfest,” Cornelius said when we met up with him downstairs. “Lieseleta and I will return with Lady Rozemyne, so Matthias, Gretia, could you stay a little longer to ensure all the luggage and the chef are sent over? You won’t need to worry too much, since Norbert will carry out a final check when he comes to lock the door.”

We arrived at the teleportation hall as those final checks were being discussed. The two knights stationed there recoiled when they saw me, their expressions tinged with subconscious revulsion at this uncanny development.

On instinct, I took a step back; my retainers had been troubled by my sudden growth spurt, but this was the first time anyone had reacted with displeasure.

“Are you still not used to your new height?” Matthias asked with a reassuring smile, as if telling me not to worry about the knights, and gently urged me forward. “The burden of Anwachs’s blessing is a heavy one.”

I smiled in turn. “Matthias, I entrust the rest to you. Please return with Gretia when you can.”

“As you will.”

Cornelius, Lieseleta, and I then stepped onto the magic circle. The knights on the other side reacted in the same way as their Royal Academy counterparts, leaving me with an unpleasant taste in my mouth as I exited the room.

“There you are, Rozemyne!” boomed an unmistakable voice. “Ooh! Hartmut

said you'd grown, but look at you! You're the most beautiful woman in all of Yurgenschmidt!"

"You exaggerate, Grandfather."

Cornelius was quick to intervene. "You're too close!" he exclaimed, trying to wave away the overeager Bonifatius. "Please take a step back."

Waiting behind Bonifatius were Sylvester, Florencia, Wilfried, Charlotte, Melchior, and their retainers. Their jaws had all dropped. Of course, my own retainers were there too.

Ngh... So many eyes on me...

"Sylvester, it is good to see you again," I said. "I am sorry to have worried you. Forgive me for being so blunt, but may I have a moment of your time? There is something extremely important we must discuss. I know how Lady Georgine intends to steal Ehrenfest's foundation."

Sylvester's look of shock hardened into one of grim determination.

"As this relates to the foundation," I continued, "you are the only one I mean to inform. Please summon me when we can speak alone."

"We'll speak now; this isn't something that can wait. Bonifatius, escort Rozemyne to my office."

Sylvester then wheeled around, his cape flourishing in the process, and marched away with his retainers in tow. Meanwhile, Bonifatius placed one hand firmly on his hip, imploring me to hold on to his arm. I smiled and obliged. In the past, my eyes had only reached his wrist, but now they reached up to his elbow.

Wilfried stood protectively beside Bonifatius and me; then my other siblings did the same. They were basically forming a defensive circle around us.

"Hartmut wouldn't shut up about how much you'd grown," Wilfried said. "Looks like he was telling the truth. That's a shocker."

"Eheheh... I'm a beauty now, wouldn't you agree? Not even I could believe it when I first looked in the mirror."

"Yep. You really are. But you didn't grow on the inside, did you? Somehow, the gap between your looks and your personality is even worse now."

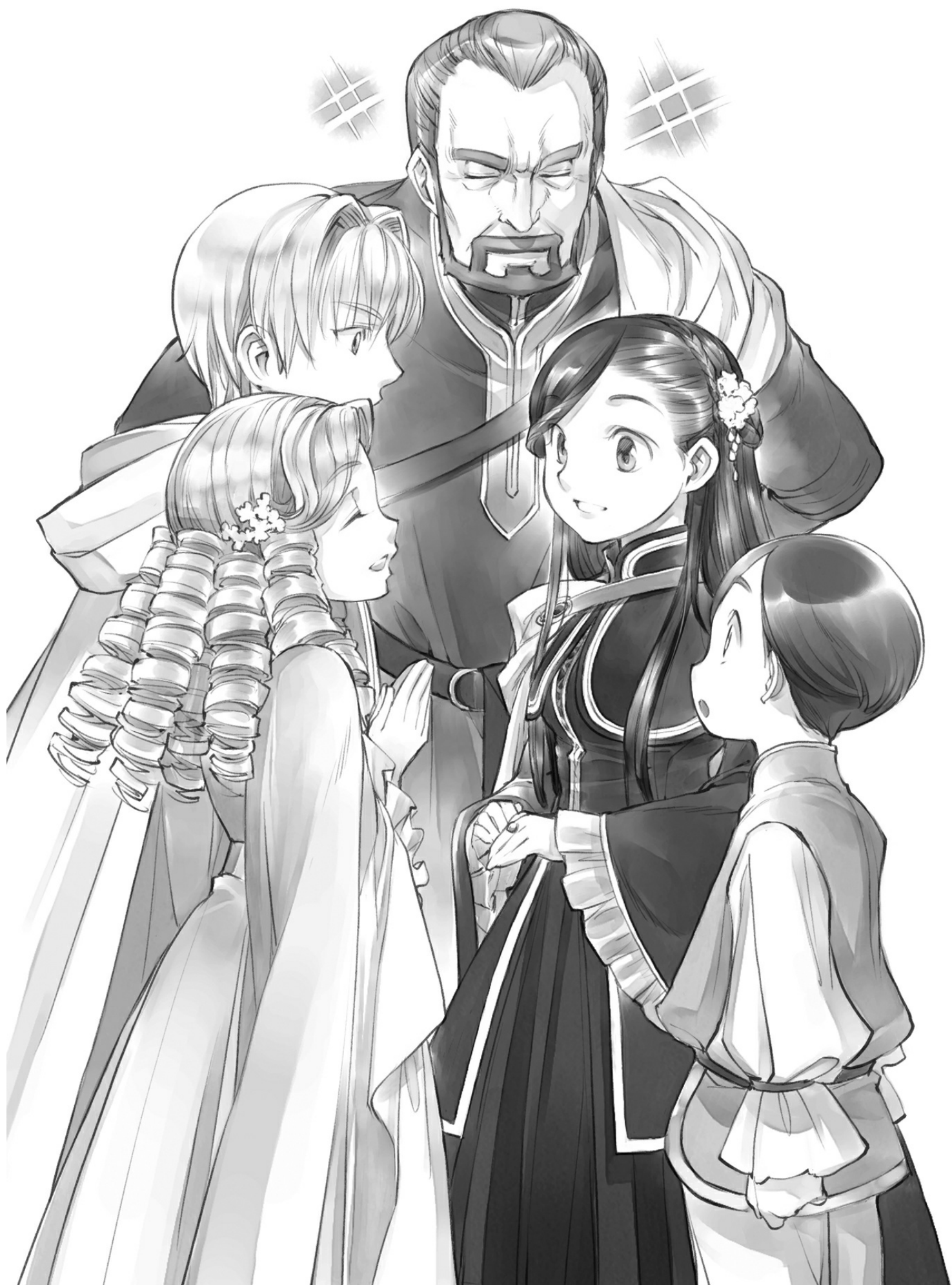
“That makes us the same, then.”

“Huh? Not at all. I’ve grown a lot.”

As we bantered, I tried to eyeball which one of us was taller. Annoyingly enough, he just barely won out. He must have hit a growth spurt too, and it seemed to me that he was still getting taller.

“Welcome back, Sister,” Charlotte said. “Oh my... You are taller than me now, even if only a little. What a strange feeling.”

Ooh! She’s right! Now I actually look like her big sister!



At that moment, I was more grateful to Erwaermen and Anwachs than ever before. I'd regained my dignity as an older sister!

As I trembled with emotion, Melchior gazed up at me, looking equally moved. "Hartmut told me in the temple that Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom invited you to the world of the gods," he said. "He told me you were growing through their blessing... but I can't believe it was all true."

"Hartmut?!" I sharply turned to the man in question, who was innocently smiling at me.

"I spoke only the truth," he said. "Before my very eyes, Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom swept you away. The entire time you were gone, I could feel that you were growing."

"Hm?" Melchior watched me closely for a moment, then asked, "Was he lying after all, Sister?"

I racked my brain for an appropriate answer. The problem was that Hartmut was mostly right.

"He... was not, no," I eventually replied. "The majority of what he said was accurate. It was a blessing from Anwachs that caused me to grow."

"So you *were* blessed, Sister."

Gaaah! That isn't quite true, but I can't think of a good explanation! Worst of all is that victorious expression on Hartmut's face!

I wanted to get to Sylvester's office as quickly as I could; the realization that my sudden growth and Hartmut's propaganda had only added to the story of my sainthood was making me uncomfortable. But unfortunately for me, I still couldn't walk very well. My knees buckled almost immediately, forcing me to cling to Bonifatius's arm.

"My apologies, Grandfather. I am still not used to this body, so—"

"Then allow me," he said, hefting me up before I could say that I wanted to use my highbeast. He'd acted so swiftly that Cornelius hadn't even been able to stop him.

"Um... I am much heavier than before," I said. "Please put me down."

“Nonsense! Your extra weight makes things easier for me, if anything!” Bonifatius declared, brimming with pride. “You were so light before that I didn’t know what to do with you, but now that you’re a grown woman? I’ve got plenty of experience carrying my wife, so this is no trouble at all.”

My knights were all wavering in the face of this new development, unsure how to react to their charge suddenly being taken from them.

“What are your orders, Lady Rozemyne?” Angelica asked. “Should we launch an all-out offensive to free you from my master?”

“That sounds violent—and a lot more likely to put me in danger,” I replied. “Remain at ease for now.”

I relaxed my muscles and allowed Bonifatius to carry me. At the very least, he didn’t seem taken aback or repulsed; he was genuinely excited to see that I’d grown.

“Most people get carried around when they’re young and lose that privilege once they’re a grown-up,” I mused. “But the inverse is true when Grandfather’s doing the carrying. I might as well enjoy this while I can.”

The Foundational Magic

In the end, Bonifatius carried me to the archduke's office as though I were a child. Karstedt and the vice commander of the Knight's Order, who were both standing outside the room, blinked when they saw me in his arms.

I doubt they expected to see me all grown-up—and in a princess carry.

Karstedt shot Cornelius a worried glance; then he gave his jubilant father a brief, exasperated smile before adopting a more neutral expression and opening the door for us. "Lady Rozemyne, Aub Ehrenfest awaits," he said.

"Indeed," I replied. "Grandfather, I thank you ever so much for your support."

Once he had set me down, I carefully made my way into the room where Sylvester—and Sylvester alone—awaited me. The door shut behind me, and instinctively I spun around. Or at least I tried to; before I could complete my turn, I tripped over my ankle and dramatically collapsed.

Sylvester barely attempted to hide his amusement, then erupted in laughter. "What're you doing?! Here I was, all nervous, thinking we were about to have a serious conversation!"

"Ngh... I'm still not used to this body. You don't mind me using my highbeast here in the castle, do you?"

He stopped guffawing—although he was still grinning from ear to ear—and came over to help me up. I took his hand, got back on my feet, and resolved to walk even more carefully.

"I couldn't stop bumping into things and tripping over while I was getting changed this morning..." I griped. "Then my knees buckled when I tried to walk with Grandfather."

"Makes sense that you'd want to use your highbeast..." Sylvester replied. Then he grimaced and said, "But do you really wanna be seen in that thing? Especially with your new, uh... *look*."

“My Pandabus is adorable, okay?” I shot back, my cheeks puffed out. “It doesn’t look anything like a grun.” It made no sense to change my highbeast when Lessy was both cute *and* convenient.

“It doesn’t suit you anymore. Nor do the ways you act and speak. Anyone who sees you now is going to expect a genuine saint.”

“Wilfried said the same thing—and after seeing my reflection in the mirror, I agree with you both. But what can I do? Putting up an occasional front is manageable enough. Completely reworking one’s personality is not. I thought you, of all people, would understand that.”

Sylvester took one look at my smile—I was making it *very* clear that he hadn’t changed much either—then frowned and nodded. “Yeah, I guess you’ve got me there...”

I sat down opposite Sylvester and took a deep breath; the reason for our meeting was a serious one. He gave me a stern look in response.

“So, about my sister...” he began. “You know how she intends to steal the foundation?”

For an aub, having one’s foundation stolen was the absolute worst-case scenario. It meant losing one’s duchy and was a veritable death sentence, as the new aub would immediately kill whomever they had stolen the foundation from to prevent it from being taken back.

In such situations, it was very common for the rest of the usurped archducal family to be killed as well. Sometimes, one young member might be spared and engaged to a child of the new archducal couple—a tactic used to better control the previous generation of nobles—but Georgine was already from Ehrenfest; there was no reason for her to let any of us live.

On second thought, the mana shortage *was* pretty dire; maybe she would spare Sylvester’s children and imprison them in the Ivory Tower, where they would spend the rest of their days having their mana drained. But could that really be described as living?

“I do not have conclusive evidence,” I said. “But if we consider her theft of our bible, there can be only one explanation.”

“Wait, *that’s* what you’re basing this on? Not some new hidden passageway or magic tool you’ve come across?”

“I will start with my conclusion,” I said. Maybe there were other paths to consider, but the information I’d absorbed about the country’s temples and the role of the bible had made one thing clear to me: “The *true* location of each duchy’s foundation is directly below its temple’s chapel.”

“What?!” Sylvester choked. He froze in place for several seconds, then shook his head in total disbelief. “*What?!?*”

“Of course, not just anyone can reach the foundation. It resides in an ivory room, separated from the temple through magical means.”

“I would hope so, but... To think it’s under the *temple*, not the castle...”

“It stands to reason that people came to assume the foundation was located in the castle; the magic tool passed down from aub to aub is a key necessary for teleporting to the foundation, and the door it must be used with is located in the archduke’s room. This misconception has plagued all those throughout history who have invaded a duchy’s castle and torn it apart in search of the foundation.”

Sylvester’s face twisted into a particularly severe grimace. If an aub died without passing down the magic tool serving as the key to their foundation, their successor would need to search for it. In most cases, it would be on the aub’s person or inside a hidden room, but they didn’t look like regular keys and were thus always miserable to find.

I continued, “But there is also a *secondary* key—one that was given to future aubs in advance of their succession. If a new aub found themselves unable to access the main key, this secondary key would allow them to carry out their duties while they searched.” By this logic, it shouldn’t have been necessary for anyone to supply the foundation from the Mana Replenishment hall while desperately trying to find where it was hidden.

“Rozemyne, this is the first I’ve heard of a secondary key. I certainly wasn’t given one. Don’t tell me Father gave it to Geor—”

“He didn’t,” I said, shooting down the idea before Sylvester could turn a truly

terrifying shade of white. “How much do you remember about Yurgenschmidt’s founding?”

“A bit... Where are you going with this?” He probably thought I was derailing our conversation, but that couldn’t be further from the truth.

“I assume you haven’t forgotten that the first Zent also served as a High Bishop. It seemed only natural to place the foundation in a temple, where one prayed to the gods.”

Foundations were created alongside temples so that *all* prayers would flow into them, not just those from the Zent, and to make it easier for those prayers to reach the gods. Zents were also responsible for creating bibles and the divine instruments, which they would do while creating a duchy’s foundation. That such work was counted among their duties made it seem to me that only those who obtained the Grutrissheit would ever learn it.

“For some time afterward, the country’s aubs apparent also served as High Bishops,” I said. “You surely know this by now, but it was an important duty for obtaining divine protections and increasing mana capacities through religious ceremonies.”

“Yeah, makes sense.”

As generations had passed, the aubs apparent dedicating themselves to religious ceremonies in the temple had ended up politically weaker than the other archduke candidates who could spend time in the castle and unify nobles under themselves. Even when the aubs apparent became actual aubs, they were treated as mere figureheads who existed only to perform religious ceremonies. Over time, the connection between religion and politics weakened until archduke candidates started refusing to visit the temple entirely. The system the first Zent had created fell out of use, and its purpose was quickly forgotten.

“As much as I appreciate the history lesson,” Sylvester said, “what’s your point?”

“The key for opening the bible, which was originally always given to the future aub, is the secondary key meant for opening the door to the foundation in the temple.” That was why it hadn’t been too much of a problem in the past when

aubs had abruptly died. “Lady Georgine exchanged many intimate letters with Bezewanst, the former High Bishop, so I suspect she learned something about this from him. He was the only one she knew who ever touched the bible.”

Normal nobles never went near the temple. Related classes at the Royal Academy only covered the basics, and public perception meant that few bothered to delve any deeper. I wasn’t sure whether Georgine had ever visited the temple, but Bezewanst had certainly visited the castle and the Noble’s Quarter, and the letters he’d shared with Georgine had made it very clear that he’d doted on her.

“You say that, but if Georgine really had known about all this, she would have tried to steal the foundation a long time ago. Before leaving for Ahrensbach, before I was made aub, when she visited Ehrenfest...”

“But what if she didn’t learn the truth about the foundation until after I’d taken over as High Bishop? It would have been much harder for her to get the key then.”

“Ah, right. Back when she visited, I gave her permission to take some of my uncle’s letters as mementos. Most of them were letters she’d written, but there were a few he’d written to her but hadn’t managed to send. That information must have been in one of those.”

Sylvester was now sitting with his head in his hands, looking completely exhausted. He had checked the letters and determined that it was safe to let Georgine have them, assuming that because Bezewanst hadn’t been a noble, he wouldn’t have been able to employ any magical trickery. But there were plenty of ways to use coded messages to convey information.

“Does that mean you have the key right now, since you’re the High Bishop?” Sylvester asked.

“It remains in the temple, but do not let that distract you from what matters most—Georgine has the means to obtain our foundation without coming to the castle or needing to probe you for its whereabouts. Considering that the bible incident was carried out by Viscountess Dahldorf, one of her name-sworn, we can say with all certainty that she is targeting the entrance in the temple.”

Sylvester heaved a weary sigh. “Yeah, there doesn’t seem to be any doubt

about that. I was keeping an eye on the castle's door to the foundation and even worked with Bonifatius to make sure the hidden passageways were all covered. It never even crossed my mind that she might steal it from the temple."

Modern-day temples were run by blue priests without much mana at all, so Georgine wouldn't have much trouble stealing our key. If she attacked our temple now, it would only be a matter of time before she seized the foundation.

"Knights guard the temple during Melchior's or my visits," I said. "But in our absence—during the entirety of winter socializing bar the Dedication Ritual, as well as during Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival—there is very little protection to speak of. Remember also that we leave the bible and its key in the temple while we are away."

Sylvester swallowed dryly. Thinking about it now, the temple *was* ridiculously vulnerable. There were guards present when we archduke candidates visited, but otherwise, a single key stood between an invader and our foundation.

I continued, "I trust you to decide what we should do with the bible's key. You must also consider how to keep the foundation's true location hidden and what you will disclose in order to protect it. Shoring up the temple's defenses out of the blue would draw unwanted attention, but you must do *something*. It is an aub's duty to protect his foundation."

Once Spring Prayer concluded and I departed from Ehrenfest, I wouldn't have any right to get involved with such matters. I needed Sylvester to decide whether it was safe for me to give Melchior the bible's key.

"No matter how we plan to defend our foundation, I'll make sure to involve the temple," Sylvester assured me. "If my sister does intend to make her move, she'll do it during the upcoming Spring Prayer..."

"What makes you so sure?" I asked, my lips pursed. Jumping to conclusions was a surefire way to get blindsided. "Last year's purge crippled her support base here in Ehrenfest. She could wait until autumn, winter, or even next year."

Still, there was an assured glint in Sylvester's eye. "Every single duchy knows you were bedridden for an entire season. One professor even made a huge fuss,

demanding to know whether you had ‘ascended to the towering heights,’ and was fired for her trouble. Not to mention, we haven’t yet publicized your return here in Ehrenfest. Georgine must be convinced that our temple’s guard is thinning out—and most of all, she’ll need to finish this before Ferdinand gets a room in the main building of Ahrensbach’s castle. She can only keep him away until the next Archduke Conference, when his Starbinding will take place.”

Oh, right... Ferdinand did say in his letter that moving had made it harder to gather intelligence...

“I can’t thank you enough for this information, Rozemyne. For the first time ever, I’m going to be one step ahead of my sister.”

“If she means to act during Spring Prayer, then perhaps she is already nearby. Crossing duchy borders is trivial with that silver cloth.”

Sylvester squeezed his eyes shut. “Lanzenave’s envoys were dressed in silver cloth. I can’t say whether it was the same kind of cloth we found, but if Georgine imports enough, we can probably assume she’s preparing for war.”

Mestionora’s knowledge didn’t include anything about the silver cloth—or about trug, for that matter. Either they were new products or the Grutrissheit simply didn’t contain information about other countries. Or maybe it did, but the information was in the section that had gone to Ferdinand.

As I stood up to leave, Sylvester had one more question for me: “By the way, Rozemyne—where did you even learn about all this?”

I paused, then smiled. “Where do you think?”

Sylvester stared at me for a moment, an indescribable look on his face. “Did you... Did you really find it?” He didn’t specify what he was referring to. There was no need. We both understood what he meant.

“Not the whole thing—just under seventy percent of it—and some crucial parts are missing. It’s rather troublesome.” I carefully made my way over to the door, then turned to Sylvester, stuck out my chest, and said, “I shall go straight to the temple. Given that Georgine’s lot had time to swap out our bible, they might have done something to the key as well. We can rule out poison, but the sooner I check it, the better. I could confirm the bible’s authenticity based on its

weight, appearance, and smell, but I am still uncertain about the key.”

Sylvester clasped his head and groaned. “Make sure you’re thorough with it. I don’t wanna find any weird traps on the key I’m supposed to pass down to future generations.”

“Uh-huh. See you later.”

The Bible's Key

"I must head to the temple," I announced upon returning to my room. "The aub has asked me to complete a task for him. I would also like to meet with the Gilberta Company while I am there."

Lieseleta's eyes flashed with discontent. "If possible, could you come back to the castle tomorrow to have your measurements taken? I plan to ask Lady Florencia's, Lady Charlotte's, and Lady Elvira's personal seamstresses to order your new clothes."

Everyone else agreed that I couldn't keep relying on garments lent to me by one of my retainers, so I approved the suggestion. To be honest, I didn't have much of a choice—if my new clothes weren't ready in time for the Archduke Conference, I would end up in the worst-case scenario of needing to head to the Sovereignty without anything to wear. Lieseleta and Ottilie had put themselves out to set all this up for me; I couldn't let their hard work go to waste.

"Very well," I said. "I shall return to the castle tomorrow."

"Lady Rozemyne, might I join you for the measuring and such?" Bertilde asked. "I wish to be of use to you." Her voice was tinged with sadness; because of my disappearance, she hadn't been able to prove her worth to me at the Royal Academy.

I crouched down a little so that I was at her eye level. "From what Lieseleta and Gretia have told me, you did more to help Charlotte with her tea parties than even Melchior's retainers. I am told you were a skilled attendant and that you succeeded in your attempts to spread our duchy's trends."

"But... I can only serve you until my sister's marriage to the aub..."

Brunhilde was due to become Ehrenfest's second wife, and it had already been decided that Bertilde would become her apprentice attendant when that happened. Bertilde's desperation to assist me as much as she could before then

was absolutely adorable.

“In that case,” I said, “tomorrow, I would ask you to select and order my summer clothes for me. Even I can tell that my aura and presence have changed. Please think hard about what might suit me.”

“I thank you ever so much,” Bertilde replied with a cheerful yet refined smile.

Next, I asked to see Brunhilde. “She must be busy enough preparing for her Starbind Ceremony, but I wish to give her a hairpin in celebration of the wedding and her retirement from my service. Bertilde, my apologies for the sudden request, but could you summon her for me?”

“Of course, Lady Rozemyne.” Bertilde rose from her seat without the slightest hesitation. “My sister will surely be overjoyed.”

I turned to my other retainers. “As I said, the aub has asked me to check something in the temple. I plan to return tomorrow, so please have Rosina, my musician, wait here for the time being. Hugo has been trapped in the dormitory kitchen for quite some time, so I will take him to the temple, then bring a replacement for him with me when I come back.”

Gretia went to contact the temple and my personnel. I watched her go out of the corner of my eye, then addressed my scholars.

“Hartmut, Philine, head to the temple together. Roderick, Clarissa, stay in the castle and transcribe the books that Lady Hannelore gave me. As for my knights... Damuel, Angelica, Matthias, Laurenz—I must ask you to accompany me to the temple. The rest of you, stay here for now; I suspect my grandfather or the aub will summon you soon enough.”

The Knight’s Order was going to be reevaluating and reworking its defense plans, so my knights were sure to be called upon. That was why I’d decided to leave Leonore and Cornelius behind—they were both archknights. One could make an argument for leaving Angelica in the castle as well, but I didn’t see much point.

As I gave out my instructions, Lieseleta and Ottilie made short work of packing my belongings. Now that I’d grown, my nightclothes in the temple wouldn’t fit me anymore, so I needed to bring some new ones.

“Welcome, Lady Rozemyne,” my temple attendants said. “We have been waiting for you to return.”

Once they had greeted me, they finally looked up... and immediately froze. I even heard a few gasps. They were watching me, but not in the way one would stare at something repulsive, nor in the way my retainers had quietly accepted my new form. Instead, their expressions were ones of *reverence*. They reminded me of the looks Melchior had given me after swallowing so much of Hartmut’s propaganda.

Eep. They’ve all been brainwashed.

“Thank you, everyone,” I replied.

“Indeed, welcome back, Lady Rozemyne,” Monika said, her eyes sparkling. “I see that Lord Hartmut was telling the truth—you really have received a blessing from the gods and grown into a beauty.”

I wavered, unsure how to respond. Hartmut had ranted nonstop about my safety and mana growth, and it was thanks to him that nobody was staring at me in disgust. Most had seen his constant blathering as a source of concern, but I couldn’t deny the role he had played in helping me live normally again.

I understand that—I really do—but it’s so hard to be grateful.

Fran spoke next: “I must admit, I am so used to your more youthful appearance that this comes as a surprise to me, but I am glad to see you have grown at last.”

“Never have I seen anyone more beautiful,” Gil added.

Fran was celebrating with a quiet smile, while Gil was praising me with clenched fists and a look of slight embarrassment. They had both served me from the very beginning—and at that thought, I couldn’t help but smile.

“I appreciate your kind words,” I said.

Gil worked with Fritz to unload my luggage from the castle while I started toward the High Bishop’s chambers. Along the way, I told Fran and Zahm about my plans for tomorrow.

“The winter coming-of-age ceremony is fast approaching...” Fran noted. “Will your new ceremonial robes be ready by then, or should we ask Lord Melchior to perform in your place?”

“My robes should not need to be replaced; they were designed so that I could continue to wear them even as I grew. The problem is that I won’t have anything else to wear until the alterations to my normal clothes are complete. I shall return to the castle tomorrow to have my measurements taken and to order new apparel. Please ask the Gilberta Company to join us.” Once my new measurements had been taken, they would alter my temple clothes accordingly.

“If you have business in the castle tomorrow, why have you come back to the temple?”

“To investigate the bible’s key. New discoveries require that I give it another look.”

We soon arrived at my chambers. Nicola had made me some tea, which I sipped while waiting for Fran to fetch the key.

“Damuel, Angelica—my apologies, but could you circle the lower city’s gates and ask whether anyone wearing silver cloth has entered the city?” I asked. “Tell the guards to be on the lookout for any such individuals but not to cause a fuss if any should appear. Instead, they should contact the Knight’s Order right away. If anyone does arrive wearing silver cloth, they are most likely to be a high-ranking noble, so I would advise against trying to arrest them on the spot.”

“Yes, my lady!”

Damuel and Angelica turned on their heels and immediately left the room, while Matthias muttered, “Lady Rozemyne, do you mean...?” We had first discovered the silver cloth in Giebe Gerlach’s summer estate, so it wasn’t hard to put the pieces together.

“Bad actors with mana might be infiltrating Ehrenfest. The feast celebrating spring ended just before I returned, did it not? The snow will soon melt, and we will need to be on guard against carriages.”

Matthias briskly stepped in front of me, knelt, and crossed his arms in front of

his chest. “Lady Rozemyne, please let me travel to Gerlach. During our previous investigation, we uncovered several small cabins hiding magic tools. Lord Bonifatius set several traps so that we could tell if anyone tried to access them. I would ask to check those traps.”

“I shall ask Grandfather. In any case, the Knight’s Order will need to go with you.”

I sent an ordonnanz relaying Matthias’s request. Bonifatius was busy enough working on Ehrenfest’s defenses with Karstedt and Sylvester, so he would send someone from the Knight’s Order to Gerlach in his place.

Right...?

“I was just thinking that someone should check them,” he replied. “It only makes sense that I should do it; we can’t risk someone else triggering them all. Matthias, prepare plenty of rejuvenation potions. We’ll go there at once and return tomorrow.”

Bonifatius intended to fly straight to Gerlach and then straight back at maximum speed, chugging as many rejuvenation potions as necessary. I took several kinds of rejuvenation potions from my hidden room and gave them to Matthias, who looked to be in the fourth stage of grief.

“You may use these,” I said. “I can guarantee their efficacy. Still, are you sure about this? Keeping up with my grandfather will not be easy.”

“I made the request in the first place, so...” Matthias paused. “Yes, I will go. I do not want any more harm to come to Ehrenfest. I shall do all that I can to protect it.”

Then he graciously accepted the rejuvenation potions.

It was all well and good that Matthias was going to Gerlach, but Laurenz wouldn’t be able to guard me on his own. I started debating whether I should summon Judithe, but Matthias smiled and told me not to worry.

“I have already contacted Judithe,” he said. “We cannot leave you without sufficient protection, so she is coming to the temple with Lord Bonifatius.”

Wowee... My retainers are so extremely competent.

Just as the busily moving knights began to settle down, Fran returned. “Here is the key to the bible,” he informed me.

“Thank you, Fran,” I replied and rose from my seat. “I shall retire to my hidden room to inspect it. Judithe, Laurenz, there is no need for you to follow me inside. Please wait here for now.”

My two knights nodded their understanding while I stepped into my hidden room alone. I set the key down on the table with a quiet *clack*, then took out my schtappe and chanted, “*Grutrissheit*.” The Book of Mestionora appeared in the form of an electronic tablet, which I used to search for information about the keys used to unlock the country’s bibles.

“Let’s see...”

According to the text, each key was made to match the foundation of its respective duchy. On top of the registration feystone, there was another, much smaller feystone that bore the color of whichever duchy it belonged to.

Curious, I started inspecting the key. The tiny feystone was easy enough to find, but it wasn’t dark yellow—it was light violet.

“What? This isn’t our key! It’s Ahrensbach’s! But how?! We’ve used it so many times to open our bible!”

Frantic, I continued to read as quickly as I could. As it turned out, while each key was paired with a foundation, there were no restrictions on which bibles they could open. Zents made the keys with magic, so they were all physically identical. One could use any key to open any bible as long as the mana registered to them both was the same.

To the Zents of the distant past, the bibles for High Bishops had served as instructional textbooks covering the prayers and religious ceremonies one needed to perform to obtain the Book of Mestionora. Obtaining a schtappe-made Grutrissheit was the ultimate aim, as they were far more convenient than the heavy and easily damageable bibles.

Plus, there are times when the bibles need to be swapped around, so it makes sense not to have a unique key for each one.

Historically, whenever a duchy was formed or destroyed, the Zent would personally take care of its foundational magic and the key required to access it. Bibles and the divine instruments in the temple, on the other hand, were often preserved and reused.

Each of the keys made by the Zent was paired with a particular foundation, meaning they could only be used in the temples of their respective duchies. But as they were meant to be used in cases when the aub suddenly died, the keys didn't need to be registered with the same mana as their foundations; anyone could use them as long as they were at the right door.

"So where in the world is Ehrenfest's key?" I wondered aloud, in a daze—but the answer was already lurking at the back of my mind. Georgine had seized it long ago.

I thought back to when she'd stolen our bible. I'd noticed that its key had contained someone else's mana, but rather than investigating further, I'd simply redyed it. It had never even crossed my mind that it might belong to another duchy, especially when I'd managed to open our bible with it.

"Now that we've figured out the truth, isn't Ahrensbach vulnerable to having its own foundation stolen? I don't understand why Georgine would do something so risky..."

I truly had no idea what she was thinking. Had she arrogantly assumed we would never notice the deception? Or did she just not care about Ahrensbach's foundation? Maybe this was all part of some elaborate plot to trap us. I really couldn't tell.

One thing *was* clear to me, though: Georgine was so obsessed with Ehrenfest's foundation that she was willing to abandon her people and even her own daughters to reach it. Worst of all, I didn't get the impression that she planned to treasure it; rather, it seemed to me that she only cared about taking it from Sylvester and possibly even destroying it with her own two hands.

And if destroying our foundation really is her ultimate goal...

The blood drained from my face. If she wanted to devastate Ehrenfest, not become its aub, then she was my most dangerous enemy. I wouldn't be able to negotiate with her, nor would there be any way to appeal to her emotions. She

would murder anyone in her path without the slightest hesitation. And as for the commoners... If she saw me try to protect them, she would probably view them as a weakness to be exploited and start attacking them relentlessly.

“Seizing a foundation can’t be too hard if you don’t care what happens next...”

Foundations were made of magic, and their role was as important as their name suggested: they were the literal groundwork upon which each duchy rested. As I’d learned during my Royal Academy classes, filling a foundation with mana enriched its land, while depriving it until it ran empty would cause its cities to fall apart and the land to morph back into a white desert. That was why one would normally either slowly replace the former aub’s mana with their own or go through the trouble of dyeing it all at once.

But if someone merely wanted to steal and destroy a foundation... they wouldn’t need much time *or* mana. They could prepare a bunch of empty feystones to suck out all the mana or just strike the foundation with a massive spell. In either case, draining Ehrenfest would cause not just the capital city but also the forests, farms, and such to crumble into white sand. It was unlikely that any of the commoners would survive, but if whoever was stealing the foundation didn’t care about that, they would easily be able to redye it from there.

It was normally forbidden to destroy duchies in such a manner, but the ruling Zent didn’t have a Grutrissheit, meaning he was unable to punish anyone who committed such crimes. Georgine understood that, which explained why she was being so forceful.

We need a Zent. A proper Zent with a Grutrissheit.

I already had most of the Book of Mestionora; if I could also obtain Yurgenschmidt’s foundation, I would easily be able to stop Georgine. Just as there existed a sizable gap between an aub with a foundation and an archduke candidate who had merely learned about them in school, there was much a Zent with a foundation could do that an heir apparent with nothing but a Grutrissheit could not.

I want to stop Lady Georgine.

But that motivation wasn't enough; my version of the Grutrissheit was still incomplete, and the magic circles necessary for large-scale spells were obscured in my mind. I needed to either complete the Book of Mestionora or access the transcribed version for Zents located at the back of the underground archive.

How can I protect Ehrenfest? Surround the whole city with Schutzaria's shield, maybe...?

It was an idea, but we didn't know when Georgine was going to appear, and trying to maintain the barrier nonstop wasn't feasible. There was also a chance she'd simply use Lanzenave's silver cloth to slip through it. The best solution would be to capture Georgine before she could get close to the foundation; she would need to come here personally if she wanted it.

There was no point trying to come up with a solution on my own, especially when I was feeling so panicked; I was just going to end up running in circles. Reporting back to Sylvester was the smartest move, so I picked up the bible's key and stepped out of my hidden room.

"I discovered something important and must return posthaste to the castle," I announced. "For safety's sake, I shall take the key with me. Fran, when Damuel and Angelica return, tell them to stand guard outside the temple's front and back doors, respectively. Then go to Hartmut's chambers and inform him that he must summon Melchior to the temple."

Anxiety and the Measuring

I sent an ordonnanz to Sylvester, explaining that I'd made an important discovery and needed to speak with him, then returned to the castle. He replied that he would see me tomorrow after dinner. Reevaluating Ehrenfest's defense plans was his top priority right now, and with Bonifatius's sudden departure for Gerlach, he couldn't afford to spare even a moment.

But this is urgent!

Considering that the usual wait time for an appointment with a noble was three days, this was an exceptionally quick turnaround. Still, the situation was so dire that the thought of waiting an entire day was unbearable, especially when the information was too sensitive for an ordonnanz.

"Lady Rozemyne, we are so pleased you have returned sooner than anticipated," Ottilie said. "We can discuss the clothes you are going to order tomorrow."

She and Lieseleta then took out various boards for me to review. My sudden, unexpected growth had forced them to cancel all the outfits I'd ordered for my move to the Sovereignty at the end of spring. Now, the only way I was going to have my spring and summer outfits ready in time was if we mobilized all the relevant seamstresses. There wasn't enough time for us to leisurely discuss designs when they arrived; we had to make up our minds here and now.

"And not just your outerwear," Lieseleta continued. "You are lacking socks, shoes, underclothes—everything. If we do not discuss your preferences and make some headway on which designs to use now, a single day will not be enough."

Bertilde and Gretia were summoned—as were Clarissa and Leonore, of all people—and the discussions began. The changes to my facial features and the general air I exuded meant the cute clothes we had ordered before no longer suited me. Their designs would need to be completely reworked.

“Redyeing cloth is a time-consuming endeavor... Would you consider using some not sourced from your Renaissance?”

“No, I would not,” I replied. “How am I to count her among my personnel if I do not use her cloth? I do not want her to feel out of place after we move, so let us think carefully about these designs.”

Since I had already been in the process of growing before my encounter with Erwaermen, the flowery cloth my mom had dyed was already more mature in style than that used to make my earlier outfits. Surely we could still use it in some capacity.

“Could we base my new clothes on the ones I’m borrowing from Brunhilde?” I suggested. “She has already expertly incorporated my trends into her designs. It should save us so much time compared to starting from scratch.”

I pinched the skirt I was currently wearing to demonstrate. We wouldn’t have much trouble replicating the designs, but my hair and skin tone weren’t the same as Brunhilde’s, so we would need to put more thought into the cloth we used.

“If we can, Lady Rozemyne, I would appreciate the chance to add something unique to your new clothes. We cannot have you wear exactly the same attire as one of your retainers.”

In other words, because I needed to introduce trends, it was better that I add something to Brunhilde’s clothes rather than simply replicate them. I paused to consider what I could do, but no matter how much I tried to focus, my thoughts kept wandering to Georgine and the temple. Preparing my clothes was an urgent issue—I understood that—but this was no time to discuss them.

Just as I tried to swallow the indescribable anxiety bubbling up my throat, I remembered something I could use to connect Ahrensbach and my clothes: the cloth that Ferdinand had sent me.

“What if we use the cloth from Ahrensbach?” I said. “It is thin enough that it should be ideal for summer clothing. We could stack petals over the skirt, and if we layer the sleeves like this, the dyed patterns beneath will appear transparent, making the garments feel entirely unique.”

“Oh, what a wonderful idea,” Bertilde replied. “I would very much like to wear such clothes.” She picked up the patterned cloth, a sparkle in her eyes, and started to layer it as suggested. The others looked on lovingly but had to remind her that these were *my* clothes, not hers.

Once we’d settled on a rough design to streamline tomorrow’s meeting with the seamstresses, it was time for dinner. I asked to have mine brought to my room, not wanting the others to see my embarrassing lack of coordination, and then ate at my own pace. The precise and delicate movements necessary to eat gracefully were simply beyond me in this new body. Anytime I tried to slice into the meat, my cutlery screeched against the plate, and when I eventually managed to bring a morsel up to my mouth, I would sometimes jab it into my cheek by mistake.

“You seem far more comfortable than yesterday,” Lieseleta said in an attempt to reassure me.

“Perhaps,” I replied. “Though I still have a long way to go...”

Once I’d eaten, I bathed and climbed into bed. Tomorrow, I would finally have a chance to speak with Sylvester. Matthias would also return with Bonifatius, hopefully bearing some good news.

“You look a tad unwell, Lady Rozemyne. Did you get much sleep?”

“Lieseleta... It would seem Schlaftraum did not grace me with his blessing last night.”

An awful nightmare had jolted me awake. In it, I’d warned Sylvester of the impending danger too late, and the consequences had shaken me to my core.

Still anxious, I went to the hall where I was going to be measured. Florencia, Elvira, Brunhilde, Charlotte, and their retainers had gathered so that I could order my spring and summer clothes all in one go. We had decided to break our day into chunks, taking care of the main garments in the morning before moving on to the shoes and accessories in the afternoon, but I was still met with a huge crowd when I arrived.

“Lady Rozemyne is here.”

The seamstresses reacted to my entrance in one of two ways: they looked either completely taken aback or completely unfazed. It was easy to tell which of them knew me well and which of them I'd never interacted with before.

Tuuli was among the shocked-looking seamstresses; she was able to come to the castle now that she had come of age. It was important that she feel comfortable here—after all, she would need to enter the royal palace when she accompanied me to the Sovereignty. This came as no surprise, considering her role as my craftswoman, but she really was moving up in the world.

Look, Tuuli! Look! I'm all grown-up!

The moment I saw her, the anxiety eating away at me vanished, replaced with complete happiness. I stood up straight in an attempt to look even taller, but not for long—the fear that I might suddenly collapse brought me back to my senses. In an attempt to reinforce the regal air I now exuded, I approached my chair as carefully and as gracefully as I could.

“Bertilde, Ottilie,” I said, “please inform my mothers of the designs we decided upon yesterday. Lieseleta, Gretia, attend to my measuring.” The others would discuss which clothes to order while my new measurements were being taken.

“Understood.”

Ottilie explained today's schedule; then the Gilberta Company's seamstresses divided themselves between the two groups. Tuuli came over to me with a tape measure in hand.

“Will you be the one measuring me?” I asked.

“Yes, my lady. The hairpins I make will need to complement whatever designs are chosen.” Tuuli then started to take my measurements, with help from another seamstress, and wrote them all down on a board. “Messengers from the temple informed us that your growth was the result of blessings from the gods. Looking at these numbers, they certainly were not exaggerating.”

“Indeed. My new appearance was a blessing from Anwachs the God of Growth, but none of my clothes fit me anymore.” I gently touched the ornament in my hair. “At least I can still use your hairpins.”

Tuuli gave me a bright smile. “I designed them to be usable for a very long time.”

Hmm... I'm not as tall as Tuuli. Am I still on the shorter side?

Nobody here knew this, but Tuuli and I were sisters; I couldn't help but compare our heights. I'd been determined to beat her for the longest time, but not even Anwachs's blessing could give me the advantage.

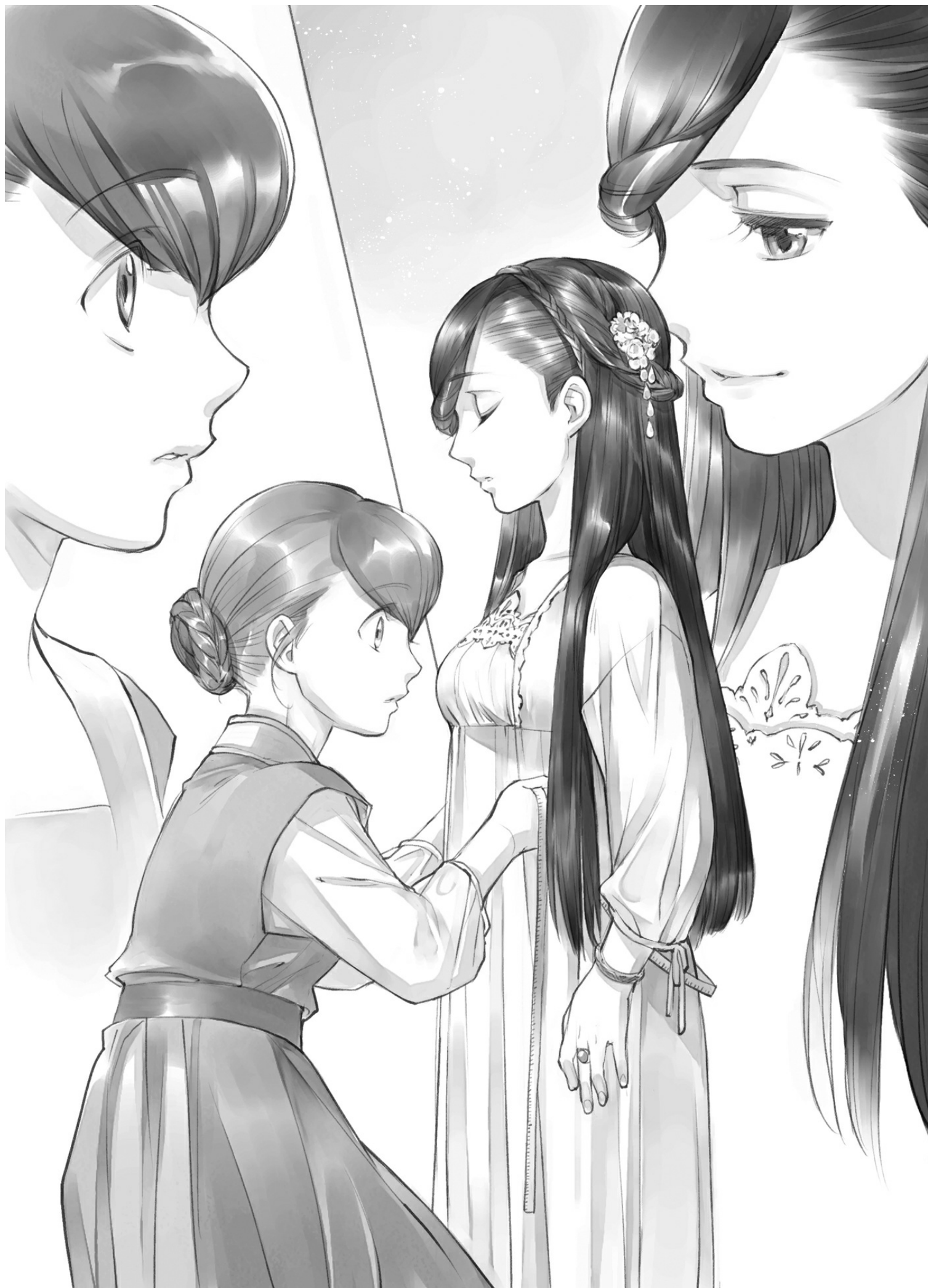
“I was so extremely worried about you when we were told to stop working on your orders...” Tuuli admitted. “I am so relieved to see you are well.”

Well, the dangerous parts are yet to come.

As it stood, nothing had actually happened yet. Our suspicions that Georgine had our key and was planning an attack during Spring Prayer were just that—suspicions. If someone accused us of having a persecution complex, we wouldn't be able to argue.

“Tuuli... No matter what happens, I *will* protect you.”

She froze, and the professional smile she wore when dealing with nobles started to waver as if she had come to a sudden realization. I gave a more genuine smile to calm her.



Once my measurements had been taken, we began to focus entirely on the designs. We had discussed them before, but now it was time to make up our minds.

“Sister, which designs would you prefer?” Charlotte asked. “This one is splendid. I would also quite like to incorporate it into my autumn clothes, so it has my recommendation.”

Before I could respond, Elvira chimed in: “If you wish to match Rozemyne, why not wear similar clothes at the Royal Academy?”

Our meeting was interspersed with short breaks and more casual conversations. And as expected, it ended up consuming my entire day.

I still need to speak with Sylvester...

How to Protect Them

“So, what’s this discovery of yours?” Sylvester asked. We had eaten dinner and were now sitting in his office, which had already been cleared of people; Ehrenfest’s foundation was not something to be discussed in the presence of others. “Was there a trap on the key?”

“Our key was swapped,” I said. “The one I possess now belongs to Ahrensbach.”

“*What?!*” He frowned, then squinted down at the key I’d brought with me. I held it out to him and pointed at its small feystone.

“This feystone here should match the color of the duchy it belongs to. This is Ahrensbach’s color, is it not?”

I explained that I didn’t know why Ahrensbach had made the swap and that I suspected Georgine wanted to destroy Ehrenfest rather than become its aub. Now seemed as good a time as any, so I also slipped in a few complaints that the whole ordeal was giving me nightmares.

“You don’t know why we’ve got their key?” Sylvester repeated dryly. “Well, now they can make all sorts of accusations. They could say that we’re targeting Ahrensbach, that Ferdinand is trying to bring chaos to their duchy in spite of the royal decree, and that they have no choice but to invade us and retrieve their key.”

In one fell swoop, Ahrensbach would denounce Ehrenfest and show the rest of the country that they had good reason to attack us. Perhaps they would even drag Sylvester’s name through the dirt by claiming he had stolen the key while visiting for the funeral, using information about the temple fed to him by Ferdinand and me.

“Then this is serious!” I exclaimed. How was Sylvester acting so calm?!

“Yeah, it is. That’s why I’m putting so much thought into our defense plans. The problem is, we don’t know when they’re going to attack, and we won’t last

long if we try to stay on high alert until they do. If you're too worried to sleep, make some magic tools that could serve as traps. Your main focus should be preparing for the adoption, but... yeah. Would you say that you're almost ready?"

I gave a vague smile. We'd just gathered everyone's personnel together in a desperate rush to order my clothes; it would be a stretch to say that I was even close to being ready.

"Is there any way I can accelerate the adoption process?" I mused. "If we could get me into the royal family and on the throne, we'd open up so many more avenues."

Above all else, I wanted the Zent's transcription that was resting all alone at the back of the underground archive. Having a complete version of the Grutrissheit, free from all the random memories and containing only the knowledge essential to performing kingly duties, would assist me massively right now.

"Your move to the Sovereignty will depend on your preparations and your own enthusiasm. That said, protecting Ehrenfest's foundation is my duty as an aub; getting the Zent to do it for me is out of the question, especially when it would also mean putting an even greater burden on you."

"But... you should use every tool at your disposal."

Sylvester shook his head, an unmistakable glimmer in his green eyes. "Look, Rozemyne... I won't say you're wrong to think that, but you need to understand that the Zent's power exists for the sake of the entire country. There's nothing wrong with the Zent choosing to help Ehrenfest, but becoming the Zent to protect our foundation? That's a lot more problematic, if you ask me."

Were I ever to become the Zent, I would need to protect *every* duchy. That included Ahrensbach, Klassenberg, and all the lesser and middle duchies that had slandered Sylvester and treated the temple with contempt. There was a chance that I would even need to isolate Ehrenfest if doing so would save the rest of the country.

"Rozemyne, do you really think you could manage as the Zent? Yes, you're fiercely protective of those close to you, but you aren't at all considerate of

anyone else. A ruler who cares only about Ehrenfest and dismisses the needs of the country as a whole will earn more ire than you can even imagine. If such discontent is allowed to fester long enough, the people might even decide to eliminate you.”

I disliked socializing and faction politics so much that I was shirking them even here in Ehrenfest, and my lack of noble common sense meant that chaos followed me wherever I went. According to Sylvester, by becoming the Zent, I would cause that chaos to spread all across Yurgenschmidt.

“You chose to become my daughter to protect your family. Back then, your only other choice was to be executed, but you have so many more options now. There *are* ways to take down my sister without you becoming the Zent, you know. And more than that, protecting Ehrenfest’s foundation is *my* obligation, not yours. Knowing all that, would you still seek to take the throne?”

I stared down at my hands. Above all else, I wanted to protect the people I cared about—and to do that, I needed power. That had always been true. Even my search for the Grutrissheit had only been so that I could save Ferdinand from being deemed guilty by association. My answer to this question—to whether I *wanted* to take the throne and the heavy burden that came with it—was painfully obvious.

“I’ve got no desire to become the Zent and rule Yurgenschmidt; I just want more ways to protect the people I care about,” I said, speaking more casually now. “If someone else could take the throne, I’d give up my claim in a heartbeat. I wouldn’t take a position that would cut down my reading time and make it harder for me to get new books unless I absolutely had to.”

“Obviously not. That’s my whole point,” Sylvester snorted. Then he leaned back in his chair, looking similarly relaxed. “Hold off on going to the Sovereignty for as long as you can—until the date you agreed upon has passed and they’re starting to get antsy. I don’t care if they only want you on the throne for a month or two; you shouldn’t willingly become Zent when you neither want nor have the resolve to see it through.”

To become the Zent, I would need to make a public announcement during the Archduke Conference that I’d obtained the Grutrissheit, earn the recognition of

the Sovereign High Bishop, and take over Yurgenschmidt's foundation. Right now, I was a mere Zent candidate with a fragmented Book of Mestionora and only a partial understanding of what the role entailed.

He continued, "Make it clear that you obtained the Grutrissheit against your will, at the royal family's command. And if you have anyone talented around you, force your work onto them; otherwise, you'll get more and more tedious jobs forced onto you."

"Sylvester?!" I cried, so taken aback that my voice cracked. "What are you saying?!"

His arms crossed, Sylvester turned away from me. "Those meetings during the Archduke Conference made it clear that not even the royals are all on the same page. Even if you did manage to obtain the Grutrissheit, I doubt they or the top-ranking duchies would really accept you as a Zent. At most, they'd use you for their own benefit. They don't have any reservations about manipulating those of us from the lower-ranking duchies."

"If you have more to say, then say it."

"I guess this *is* the last time we'll get to be truly honest with each other, huh? And more than that, it completely slipped my mind that indirect language doesn't work with you." Sylvester looked at me, his expression now as honest as his attitude. "I won't mince my words: it turns my stomach that you, of all people, are being forced to carry the entire country on your shoulders. As a commoner, all you wanted was to read, and you were only baptized as a noble to protect your family. The most you should be doing is giving blessings in the temple while the orphans watch in amazement, spreading the printing industry far and wide, securing new books, and discussing business plans to develop Ehrenfest with your merchant friends."

Those were the greatest freedoms Ehrenfest had given me—things I would absolutely never be allowed to do in other duchies. My chest heated up as it became clear to me that Sylvester understood what I wanted most.

"Does the country's survival depend on you?" he said. "Maybe. But isn't it the royals' job to keep Yurgenschmidt going? They've been cocky enough, ordering Ferdinand to move to Ahrensbach and trying to snap you up when they don't

even have a Grutrissheit. The least they can do is bear the country's burdens themselves instead of thrusting those on you as well."

During the Archduke Conference, the royals had apparently insinuated that Ehrenfest's shortage of nobles and mana was our own fault, since we had carried out an internal purge and ultimately failed to control a dispute between siblings.

That's rich. They crippled the entire country with a purge, and it was a "dispute between siblings" that cost them the Grutrissheit in the first place.

Sylvester had needed to cut ties with Veronica and Bezewanst even at the cost of crippling his own support base, and our purge had played a necessary role in clearing out what had remained of the corruption they'd nourished.

It was true that Ehrenfest was experiencing a mana shortage and that our nobles were caught in a state of confusion, but even then, we didn't regret having carried out the purge. The confusion wasn't even our fault; *someone* had decided to take Sylvester's greatest pillar of support, Ferdinand, away from us at a crucial moment. If not for those royal decrees, Ehrenfest would have been in a much better position right now.

"Rozemyne, when you get that Grutrissheit, slam it right in their faces and tell them to deal with their own damn problems. That's what I'd do."

I could already imagine it. "Consider it yours, then!" I would shout. "The royal family can deal with its own issues!" Then I'd throw the Grutrissheit straight at Anastasius's face! I clapped a hand over my mouth, trying to hide the laughter that was slipping out of me, but it was too late; Sylvester had seen everything.

"Would that feel good or what?" he said with a grin.

"I wouldn't want to damage a precious book, but... it really would feel amazing! I want to hit Prince Anastasius square in the jaw for his stupid remark that Ehrenfest should deal with its own problems."

We laughed together, enjoying the thought.

Once things had quieted down, I gave Sylvester a studying look. "So... how can we take down Lady Georgine without me becoming the Zent?"

“If we pay no mind to the consequences, then there’s an option staring us right in the face. It has been for over a year.”

Sylvester’s expression then twisted into a severe grimace. If we had another solution available to us, why hadn’t we explored it yet...?

“It’s simple,” he continued, looking as serious as I’d ever seen him. “We order Ferdinand to kill her by any means necessary. That’s why he went to Ahrensbach in the first place. ‘Send word when you wish it done,’ he said to me.”

“That’s...”

“But I don’t want to put him through that. Would you? Would you let him dirty his hands, then act as though he has nothing to do with Ehrenfest? Would you leave him to face the consequences alone, declaring him an Ahrensbach citizen and claiming that the duchy’s internal strife has nothing to do with us?”

I frantically shook my head. “Never.”

“That’s why others tell me I’m too soft to be an aub,” Sylvester said with a wry smile—but I was glad he wasn’t the kind of person who could make such harrowing orders without a second thought, for his duchy or otherwise. “He *told me* to cut ties with him the moment I thought it necessary—to cast him aside even though we’re brothers—but it’s such a tough call to make. That you can’t make it either means you’re not suited to be an aub either—or the Zent, for that matter.”

“Is there no other way we can stop Lady Georgine...?” I asked nervously.

Sylvester folded his arms. “They won’t be nearly as reliable, but... I’ve got a few more ideas. The problem is, if we care about what happens next, we can’t attack her before she attacks us. We’ve got no choice but to bolster our defenses. The situation gets even more complicated when we consider how to make it benefit Ehrenfest and minimize the casualties... You don’t want the temple to turn into a battlefield with the gray priests and orphans in the firing line, do you?”

“Of course not! The temple is like my second home, and the Rozemyne Workshop is there too! I need to protect them at all costs. I’ll put everyone

through evacuation drills before Lady Georgine makes her move.”

Sylvester nodded, having expected my answer. “That’s going to require a bit more work and mana. Thankfully for us, the snow is still thick enough to impede any carriages, and chances are that Ahrensbach only recently finished its feast celebrating spring. Danger might be on the horizon, but it won’t be getting here today or tomorrow. Instead of getting all worked up, we should think about how we’re going to overcome it.”

It was a long way from Ahrensbach to Ehrenfest’s temple. Sylvester assured me that if a small group was heading for us, the snow would delay it, and if a large group was on its way under the guise of getting Ahrensbach’s key back, they wouldn’t be able to hide.

“For now, we’ve made the call to keep two knights stationed at each gate,” Sylvester said.

“I’ve also told the soldiers to be on the lookout for silver cloth, in case anyone tries to sneak in through the lower city. They’ll send a warning signal to the Knight’s Order at the first sign of anything suspicious.”

“I see... Already executing a plan, are you?” Sylvester replied, stroking his chin. “By the way, where *is* the temple’s door to the foundation? Protecting the foundation is important, but I can’t blatantly assign knights to the temple and risk revealing its location. That’s why I want to have either you or Melchior always stay there with some guards. There might not be many of you, but we can compensate for that with some magic tools.”

“The door’s in the temple’s book room, behind a bookcase that can only be opened with the High Bishop’s key. Carved into the wall there is a statue of Mestionora. The bible in its hands can apparently be moved to reveal a keyhole.”

That same bookcase was where I’d found a box of letters from Georgine. It was possible that Bezewanst had noticed it when looking for a secure hiding place.

“Of course,” I continued, “I’ve yet to try it out, but I’m sure it works.”

“Are there any hallways one would absolutely need to pass through to get

there from the temple entrance? I'm thinking of setting up a teleporter."

Only archdukes were able to place magic circles that could teleport people. Sylvester must have wanted to stick one in Georgine's way to get rid of her.

I started to envision the layout of the temple. There were three gates in total: the back gate on the lower city's side, the front gate for carriages, and the Noble's Gate connected to the Noble's Quarter. From there, those who wanted to get into the temple proper had several options, including the chapel, the front door, the back door leading into the orphanage's basement, the entrance leading to the Noble's Gate, and the side doors for chefs and such.

And the path to the book room can change drastically depending on which entrance one uses.

"You could place it right at the entrance to the book room, but that's about it. Only those who are registered with the temple can go inside. I remember crying my eyes out when the invisible barrier wouldn't let me through."

"Ahrensbach's silver cloth can get them through the duchy barrier. I expect it'll work just as well against that one."

Using his mana, Sylvester had created a barrier around Ehrenfest City to keep nobles from other duchies from entering without permission. The problem was that it didn't work against those wearing silver cloth—and it was easy to guess that anyone who used this method to sneak in would continue wearing the cloth all the way to the temple, to guard them against mana.

"In that case, won't the silver cloth also block the teleporter you want to set up?"

"Yeah, but Georgine's gonna have to remove the cloth no matter what to teleport to the foundation. I guess placing it right in front of the bookcase is best, then. To be safe, she'll wear that cloth for as long as she physically can. Then, when she finally casts it aside, assured of victory... she'll get teleported away!" Wearing the mischievous grin of a prankster celebrating his latest pitfall, Sylvester declared, "How's that for a plan?"

It certainly was true that the silver cloth would get in the way when it came to dealing with the foundation. No matter what, Georgine would need to take it

off eventually. The thought of her getting whisked away right as she thought she'd won brought a smile to my face—and it was on that note that we agreed to place the teleporter right in front of the bookcase.

“But, uh... won't placing it there inconvenience the rest of us too?” I asked.

“Nah, I'll add a restriction so it only teleports those not registered to Ehrenfest. The book room's barrier shouldn't accept anyone from another duchy in the first place, so the teleporter won't impact anyone who enters the room properly.”

Archducal magic allowed one to distinguish between those who were registered to one's duchy and those who weren't. This meant pre-baptismal children would trigger the teleporter, but that wouldn't cause us any trouble; the pre-baptismal children in the orphanage weren't allowed to enter the noble section of the temple anyway.

“You can't sew to save your life, right?” Sylvester asked. “I'll get Florencia to make the circle, then.” He intended to ask Brunhilde and Charlotte to help out as well, but there was no need to waste that much time.

“The important thing is that she doesn't notice the teleporter, right? Heheh. Leave the circle to me. I'll just need your authority to activate it once it's done.”

All we had to do was draw the circle with invisible ink. Sylvester would need to take care of the final activation, but I wouldn't have any trouble doing the rest. It was guaranteed to be faster than sewing.

“You've got something devious in mind, haven't you, Rozemyne? You've got that look on your face.”

“There are some things in the world you are better off not knowing.”

“Despite everything I said, you've *still* managed to end up at the center of all this...” Sylvester muttered—but he gave me his permission anyway.

“So, where should the teleporter take her?” I asked.

“The Ivory Tower. No question about it. I'll prepare a room for her right next to Mother's. No matter how much she struggles in there, she won't be able to get out unless an archducal family member opens the door.”

He continued, “We should do our best to leave the temple unchanged and guide Georgine to the teleporter without giving her reason to believe something’s up. I mean, we know what she’s like: rather than making a huge scene and drawing attention to herself, she’ll try to carry out her plan in secret. She’ll create some grand distraction to keep the Knight’s Order out of the picture, then sneak into the temple.”

Considering everything Georgine had done behind the scenes thus far, Sylvester’s theory sounded spot-on. We grinned at each other, relishing the thought of her being sent to the Ivory Tower right as she thought everything was going her way.

“I still want us to evacuate the temple, though,” I said. “I don’t want anyone there to get hurt as a result of all this.”

“My top priority is capturing my sister and the rest of her faction. To that end, I’ll accept casualties in the temple and the lower city. If you don’t like that, think of a way to get her to the book room that won’t put anyone else in danger.”

It wouldn’t be unthinkable for Georgine to get someone to guide her to the book room, then murder them to cover her tracks. Thus, her guide would need to be someone she couldn’t kill.

Hmm... Something that can guide her... Preferably something that can fight back if necessary... Ah!

“I shall make my own Schwartz and Weiss to guide her to the temple’s book room!”

Preparing for War

“Your own Schwartz and Weiss?” Sylvester asked, looking thoroughly baffled. “Whaddaya mean? Where’s this coming from?”

I explained my thought process, but not even that seemed to help.

“Alright,” he said, his head in his hands, “I understand that you want to guide her there with magic tools, but don’t those require a plethora of elements and even more mana to operate? And don’t forget you’re leaving for the Sovereignty at the end of spring. Who’s going to fuel them when you’re gone? I’m betting she’ll attack during Spring Prayer, but that’s just a gut feeling. I don’t have any proof.”

“Eep!”

The magic tools I wanted to make wouldn’t require as much mana as Schwartz and Weiss, since they wouldn’t have as much work to do, but who *would* maintain them in my absence? Protecting the temple was important, but very few people had the Darkness element, and the duchy wouldn’t have any mana to spare once I was gone. It was unreasonable to expect them to supply the tools into the foreseeable future.

“Not to mention,” Sylvester continued, “do you honestly think my cautious elder sister would follow some strange magic tools? Even *I’d* find them suspicious.”

“She won’t think twice—trust me. Schwartz and Weiss are adorable!”

“That really doesn’t matter. Just seeing them in the temple is going to arouse suspicion. Wouldn’t it be more effective to have the guards carry several charms?”

I clapped my hands together and cried, “I’ve got it! In other words, I should make *combat-ready* versions of Schwartz and Weiss that can fight with the guards!”

“You really *haven’t* ‘got it’!”

“I mean, the gray priests have barely any mana at all, so I don’t see what good our charms would do them. If we want to do this properly, we should assign knights to the temple’s gates or make autonomous magic tools like Schwartz and Weiss.”

I vaguely remembered that the two shumils had drawn mana from their buttons when they’d entered combat mode. Maybe we could minimize costs by having the guards carry feystones brimming with mana and telling them to activate our magic tools only when necessary. I decided that I would check the Book of Mestionora when I next had the chance; maybe it contained a hint of some kind.

“You can leave protecting the temple to me,” I said. “For now, focus on what you’ll do if Georgine reaches the foundation. Oh, and set up some traps, of course. You could make a simple gate with *entwickeln*, stack something heavy atop it, then have the whole thing collapse on her as soon as she passes through. Or you could scatter (marbles)—um, *small round stones* all across the path she’ll need to take.”

“Yeah, I’ll make sure we’ve got some traps in place—though I’d rather she not get near the foundation in the first place,” Sylvester replied. Then he muttered, “If she doesn’t come through the border gate, where can we expect her to attack from?”

From a geographical standpoint, Gerlach made the most sense. And on that note—

“Have you spoken with Grandfather and Matthias?” I asked.

“There weren’t any traces of entry. Coupled with the absence of any tracks in the snow and the fact that Bonifatius’s instincts didn’t notice anything strange, it seems safe to conclude that nobody’s visited the province.”

By using Lanzenave’s silver cloth, one could pass through a duchy’s border without the archduke noticing. The “catch” of sorts was that one needed to be completely covered, preventing the use of *schtappes* or highbeasts. It was hard to imagine anyone traveling through Ehrenfest on foot, so our unwanted guests would almost certainly be using a vehicle of some kind.

I paused in thought. “We might not know *how* they’re going to attack us, but

would it not be wise to have the archducal family's retainers start making as many rejuvenation potions and magic tools as they can? Since you're part of the generation that participated in treasure-stealing ditter, I suspect you know what a crucial role magic tools can play in a battle."

The outcome of a battle was often based on the number of magic tools each side had at its disposal. That was why I wanted to use Bonifatius's and Rihyarda's generations as much as possible.

I continued, "How about the magic tools I used during my third year? They worked against Dunkelfelger's knights, so I'm sure they'd work here. The students who brewed them should still remember the recipe; Hartmut worked them to the bone, after all."

From there, I elaborated on the immense power of magic tools. Those that weren't simply mana-based attacks, such as flash-bangs and insect swarms, could work even on those wearing silver cloth.

"Treasure-stealing ditter, huh?" Sylvester murmured.

"Indeed. The war game is based on trying to steal another duchy's foundation or protect your own. That's why I'd advise you to consult Grandfather's generation and go through the documents that Ferdinand gave us. Though our main concern is going to be that silver cloth..."

Lanzenave's silver cloth was the perfect way to counter nobles attacking with mana—but it was basically useless against anyone who wasn't using schtappe weaponry.

"If we want to take our enemies by surprise," I said, "our best bet might be to employ commoners. Soldiers are used to normal weaponry. Perhaps they could attack any silver-clothed individuals trying to pass through the gate, or throw excrement on their cloth to force them to remove it..."

Sylvester grimaced. "You're pretty savage, you know that? No normal noblewoman would suggest throwing waste at people." To be honest, I thought my strangeness was old news by now.

"Dunkelfelger's knights were just as appalled when they saw my ditter strategies, but victory is more important than anything else, right? Ferdinand

even mentioned in his documents that noble courtesy and up-front honesty have no place in battle.”

Those who had attended the Royal Academy alongside Ferdinand had embraced that mindset under his leadership, while Ehrenfest’s current students had adopted it as a result of our dinner game against Dunkelfelger. We had to surprise our opponents to compensate for our inferior strength.

“Sylvester,” I said, “can I send Ferdinand some food and a letter? He might have some advice for us.”

“Won’t my sister notice? I’d rather we make it clear that they’re from Ehrenfest as a whole. We don’t want to draw unnecessary attention to you.”

I didn’t think it was a big deal, since I’d just recovered from a supposed illness, but I wasn’t going to complain if Sylvester wanted to take the lead.

“As long as Ferdinand receives them, that’s fine with me,” I said. “I trust you will speak with the students and archducal retainers. I am going to be in my workshop with my retinue.”

That marked the end of our discussion, so I took my leave; we were going to need all sorts of magic tools, and it seemed wise to get started on them right away. I started returning to my room, thinking that I needed to gather everyone I’d stationed in the temple, only to find Hartmut waiting for me with my other retainers, a broad smile on his face.

“Hartmut, why are you here?” I asked.

“I entrusted matters of the temple to Lord Melchior and his retainers. How went your discussion with the aub? Is there anything I can help you with?” He was imploring me with his eyes: “Please grace me with your orders!”

I took an unconscious step back, wanting to escape the pressure he was exuding. But at the same time, I needed him and Clarissa to help me brew magic tools.

“I plan to invite the scholars to my library to brew,” I said. “We must prepare for our upcoming battle against Lady Georgine by making various magic tools and rejuvenation potions.”

“If we are preparing for war, should we not summon *all* retainers serving the archducal family? Even knights and attendants can perform the more simple brews.”

“You mean I should call upon *everyone*, not just the scholars?” As I recalled, the magic tools we’d used against Dunkelfelger had all been made by apprentice scholars. The brews had simply been too complex for the apprentice knights and attendants.

“Brewing classes are mandatory for all students, so yes. Even knights can make basic rejuvenation potions, as per what they learned. Requesting their aid will allow the scholars to dedicate their time and mana to harder brews.”

He was right that we didn’t need to rely entirely on the scholars; when it came to rejuvenation potions, quantity was key. I nodded and turned to look at my other retainers, only to find Angelica vigorously shaking her head.

“I’m a guard knight,” she said. “I shall guard you, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Fear not, Angelica—I was never going to ask you to brew. Though I may ask you to gather in the nobles’ forest.”

She placed a hand on her chest, clearly relieved, and smiled. “I could not ask for a better charge, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Your praise does not please me in the slightest.”

“I am just glad you understand me so well.”

We weren’t exactly on the same page, but there was nothing more I could do about that. I gave Angelica the same smile she always gave me and moved the conversation along.

“Our plan is for the laynobles and mednobles to head to the temple workshop to make rejuvenation potions and simple magic tools for the knights going into battle. Meanwhile, the archnobles will devote themselves to more complex brews in my library’s workshop. Are there any objections? This arrangement should complement the quality of the ingredients in each workshop. Plus, it will allow Damuel and Philine to remain in contact with Melchior’s retainers if they need further instruction on temple matters.”

The temple was currently in the midst of preparing for Spring Prayer. I wasn't going to be involved this year, owing to my unexpected absence and the likelihood that I might be ordered to move to the Sovereignty at any moment. In my stead, Philine was going to attend with Damuel and my temple attendants.

"Hartmut, will you be attending Spring Prayer?" I asked.

"As a name-sworn retainer, I planned to return to your side the moment you came back to us. That is why I concluded almost the entirety of the temple handover during the winter. Arrangements have been made for Lord Melchior to perform the lower city's winter coming-of-age ceremony as High Bishop."

"Your excessive competence never fails to surprise me." It also scared and grossed me out a bit, but I elected not to mention that. His competence was something to be praised.

"I shall treasure your kind words, Lady Rozemyne."

"Hartmut was not the only one working hard," Clarissa interjected. "Over the winter, I organized the ingredients sent from the Royal Academy and moved them to the library's workshop, improved my supportive circles, and made extra fey paper in case Lord Ferdinand requested more."

Though she was blatantly vying for my attention, the work she'd done would aid us immensely in the coming battle. The extra paper she'd made was especially useful, since I could use it with my copy-and-paste skill to duplicate magic circles. The more we had, the better.

"Excellent work, Clarissa. There is much we can do with that paper. Brewing it requires so much time and mana that I did not expect us to have any, but now I can focus on creating my own Schwartz and Weiss to defend the temple."

"As for the library magic tools," Lieseleta said, turning to look at my luggage from the Royal Academy, "we do have one Professor Hirschur sent us."

I'd taken ingredients to the Royal Academy to brew with, only to suddenly disappear partway through the term. Hirschur had visited our dormitory to collect them, since my retainers had told everyone I was simply bedridden with a fever.

“She came when the Ehrenfest Dormitory was most panicked about your disappearance,” Lieseleta continued. “We gave her the ingredients in exchange for her assistance in spreading our cover story, but a lack of mana and concerns about the elements kept her from finishing the brew. She ended up asking Lord Ferdinand to help during the Interduchy Tournament, and only then was she able to finish the tool. I already have it wearing clothes. See?”

Indeed, the tool was fully dressed. Lieseleta had repurposed some of the clothing she’d made for Schwartz and Weiss.

“The tool was given only one function: searching documents,” she said. “Giving it a specialized purpose while also omitting its capacity for speech simplified the creation process and minimized the amount of mana required to keep it running.”

“There must be plenty I can learn from it, then,” I replied. “Bring it to my library alongside the documents.”

Since everyone was on board with my suggestion that we should do our brewing in groups, I returned to the temple and opened up the workshop in my chambers there. I entrusted managing the ingredients to Roderick, then established the order in which everyone would make their potions and magic tools.

Next, I turned to Damuel. “I would ask you to serve as an arbitrator between the knights guarding the gates and the soldiers. It might end up being the case that the soldiers are best suited to dealing with anyone wearing silver cloth.”

“Understood.”

This was a job that only Damuel could do, owing to the respect he had earned from the soldiers. Angelica got along with them as well, but I didn’t have any faith in her management skills.

“The knights and scholars are being split between the library and the temple, but what about the attendants?” Judithe asked.

“Lieseleta and the others may brew rejuvenation potions in the castle or make clothes for the shumils I am going to create. You should try making magic tools and rejuvenation potions that you can use as well.”

Once I'd given everyone their tasks, I went to my library. I could tell that Lasfam had a hundred questions for me—questions I really didn't have time to answer—so I gave him a smile urging him not to ask them.

I continued into my workshop and then took out the magic tool that Hirschur and Ferdinand had made for me. It was a light-green shumil. I touched it all over while reading Hirschur's research notes to see what it was capable of.

"It really was designed to search for documents..."

In any case, the Life element was necessary to make autonomous magic tools, and anyone who hoped to make their own Schwartz and Weiss would absolutely need to be omni-elemental. Hartmut and Clarissa ticked those boxes, since they'd received all the elements after giving their names to me. Perhaps their mana capacities would cause problems, but probably not huge ones. Probably.

"First and foremost, I should name it," I mused aloud. "I wouldn't want people confusing it with Schwartz or Weiss. It's a magic tool that searches through documents, so maybe Kensaku or Opac?"

Cornelius looked up from the ingredients he was cutting for my magic tools, then raised a hand to get my attention. "My apologies, Lady Rozemyne, but Lieseleta has already named that shumil. She calls him Adrett and dotes upon him terribly. Would you mind not changing it?"

"I would ask the same," Leonore agreed. "We have all grown used to calling him Adrett."

Thus, I was denied the opportunity to name the light-green shumil. Kensaku and Opac were a lot easier to understand, in my opinion—at least for those who understood Japanese and semiobscure online database naming conventions, respectively—but I saw no reason to oppose the others' wishes. "Adrett" would do.

"The combat assault shumils I intend to make will not search through files," I said. "Instead, they will specialize in eliminating intruders and dangerous individuals. I want magic tools strong enough to protect the temple."

I explained the mana-related problems Sylvester had outlined, at which point

Hartmut and Clarissa started clambering to advise me. Their insight was useful, but there was a certain book I wanted to consult.

“Hartmut, Clarissa, I must check something in my hidden room.”

“Hm?” Clarissa stared at me in surprise. “Could you not check it here?”

I merely smiled in response. Everyone here was a trusted member of my retinue, but still—I couldn’t let them see the Book of Mestionora.

“There are some documents I cannot read anywhere else,” I replied.

“Angelica, if you would guard the door. Hartmut, Clarissa, you may begin making more paper once you have finished your notes.”

I took Hirschur’s documents into my hidden room and deposited them on the table. Then I took out my schtappe and chanted, “*Grutrissheit*.”

“Let’s see... I could try searching for information about libraries *and* magic tools... Aah! Too many results!”

I didn’t know what Schwartz’s and Weiss’s actual names were, so I’d tried searching them up indirectly. My first attempt hadn’t given me the answers I’d sought, but it *had* taught me that libraries used *so many* magic tools. Based on the rows upon rows of entries, the Royal Academy’s library must have been especially important.

“Looking at the information like this also makes it *very* clear what interests Ferdinand...”

There were gaps in the sections about the underground archive and the statue of Mestionora, but the magic tool that signaled when it was time to leave was covered in full—a sign that it hadn’t interested Ferdinand at all. Given the placement of the gaps, I could guess that, unlike me, he hadn’t been able to empty his mind and simply accept the knowledge bestowed upon him.

He probably started thinking every time some information caught his attention.

That curiosity must have been the reason he’d ended up resisting Mestionora’s knowledge. The mental image of him getting scolded by Erwaermen every time he failed to clear his mind made me chuckle.

“Ferdinand really is awkward at the strangest times...” I said with a smile.

At that thought, my eyes were drawn to the leather bag containing his praise-filled magic tool. I reached over and took out the tool, eager to listen to the messages within—but when I set the bag down again, it made a quiet clunking sound.

“Oh, right. It’s double-layered. I wonder what’s inside...”

I touched the bag all over. It wasn’t that big. From what I could tell, the source of the noise was a rough feystone of some kind stitched into the fabric of the bag. It hadn’t caught my attention before, but now I was curious.

“Ferdinand gave this to me, right? So I must be allowed to look inside.”

Because the bag was double-layered, I wouldn’t simply be able to open it and peer inside; I would actually need to slice into the bottom. So I created my *schtappe*, turned it into a knife, and then poured extra mana into it.

The bag was made from nonconductive leather, taken from a feybeast that resisted all mana but its own. This made it somewhat similar to Lanzenave’s silver cloth, but the two weren’t exactly the same. This leather was only so resistant; mana weapons could still slice through it as long as the wielder had stronger mana than the original feybeast. Silver cloth, on the other hand, blocked even the most powerful mana, but one could easily cut it up with a regular blade.

“This won’t damage the thing inside, right?” I wondered as I cut a circular hole in the base of the bag. I was pouring so much mana into my knife that it moved as easily as a hot knife through butter.

Once I was done, I turned my *schtappe* back into its standard wand shape, then dismissed it entirely. My heart raced as I reached into the newly opened compartment. What had Ferdinand stashed inside? The first thing I took out was a crumpled-up oval ball—an item wrapped in white paper, about five centimeters in diameter. There was also a small, folded note.

I put the ball on the table and opened up the note. It was a letter from Ferdinand. He must have been in a serious hurry at the time because the writing was extremely rushed and messy.

“Let’s see here... ‘Contained within this paper is the name stone of a man called Quinta. Until the day I come to retrieve it, keep it in your hidden room, away from anyone else. And *do not* touch it, no matter the circumstances.’ Geez! You should have given it back to him, Ferdinand, not thrust it upon me in this roundabout way. I can’t help feeling bad for this Quinta guy.”

As I started to ponder why Ferdinand would send the stone to me rather than its owner, I suddenly remembered exactly who Quinta was.

“Ah! Wait! Isn’t that Ferdinand’s actual name or something?! Does that mean... this is *his* name stone?! Hold on a second. Then why was that note written like it was someone else’s?!”

Was there a reason he didn’t feel comfortable holding on to it? If so, why stick it inside a random bag? Couldn’t he have hidden it within one of the rooms here in the estate where his luggage was being kept? And why make a name-swearing stone in the first place when he didn’t have anyone to give it to? My mind was overflowing with questions.

“Did he give it to someone who then gave it back? I can’t really imagine him giving his name to anyone, but this is his stone, so that must be what happened...” I didn’t understand the circumstances, but all the evidence I needed was before my eyes.

Ferdinand had given me this bag before Ahrensbach had given him a hidden room. Maybe there hadn’t been anywhere else for him to hide it. Was his situation so dire that he couldn’t keep it on his person? And why had he given it to me, not someone else?

“Could it be that he trusts me that much...? No way. That can’t be it. He had no way of knowing that Erwaermen would tell me his true name, so maybe he just thought I wouldn’t bother touching a name stone belonging to a stranger. Yeah, that seems a lot more likely.”

As I stared at the ball of paper, I started to feel more and more unsettled. Was Ahrensbach really so dangerous that Ferdinand couldn’t look after his own name stone?

“I don’t know what to do with this thing...”

The paper ball was so unsteady that a simple prod would send it rolling off the table—yet the stone within had the power to end a man’s life.

“Well, I now know that Ferdinand is actually Quinta, so there’s nothing stopping me from stealing his name... I’m not sure I want that weight on my shoulders, though, so I’ll just leave the stone here.”

It didn’t matter that the stone belonged to Ferdinand; I wasn’t going to take anybody’s name without having the resolve to carry their burdens. Moreover, the note had very clearly told me not to touch it. I just needed to keep it here until the day when Ferdinand came to retrieve it. Electing to pretend that I’d never seen it in the first place, I put it back inside the bag.

Ferdinand probably knew that I wouldn’t be able to mess with someone else’s feystone—that was why he’d given his to me in the first place. It was frustrating to think that I was dancing in the palm of his hand, but at the same time, he’d still entrusted me with something immensely important. I couldn’t be *too* annoyed with him.

Sure, I’ll keep it safe. But you’d better come for it soon.

I spent the following days working on my combat-ready shumils and on magic tools that would aid us in the coming battle. I also did evacuation drills with everyone in the orphanage and registered my library’s documents with Adrett.

In the end, I was able to make three shumils that would retaliate against both mana and physical attacks. They would guard the three temple gates and recognize the guards with feystones as their masters. According to Hartmut, who had assisted me in making them, there were very few people who would actually be able to create these shumils, since they required very rare materials and omni-elemental mana.

Hartmut and Clarissa were omni-elemental now that they’d given their names to me, but elements obtained through name-swearing weren’t even half as strong as those one had to begin with. Thus, while Hartmut had narrowly managed to help me by reobtaining divine protections and using the subordinate gods’ support to strengthen his new elements, Clarissa hadn’t possessed the elemental power necessary to make one of my combat-ready

shumils.

“I want to obtain new divine protections too!” she protested, but we couldn’t allow an unmarried young woman from another duchy to be seen entering the temple. There was also my looming departure for the Sovereignty to consider, which meant we didn’t have the leeway to perform another divine protections ritual.

“I’m, um... sorry to have disappointed you once again,” I said.

“Oh, no! I should apologize! That you have allowed me to stay here before my wedding is generous enough! I am so very sorry for causing more trouble!”

“You don’t need to fret, Clarissa—I recognize how hard you’re working as my retainer.” I gazed upon the three magic tools we’d created. “If not for your extra paper, we wouldn’t have been able to make this many shumils. You also saved us an enormous amount of mana by narrowing down their functions and removing their capacity for speech. You might not have been able to create them, but you still played a crucial role in ensuring their efficiency. Your work was flawless, if you ask me.”

“By normal standards, they still require a lot of mana,” Hartmut interjected. “To keep these shumils active, an archnoble would need to replenish them once every couple of days.”

Cornelius nodded. “We can all agree that they’re going to be useful, but we should only activate them when there’s an emergency.”

“Yes, that sounds best,” I replied. We would need to save as much mana as possible, but still—could we really run all three shumils with a single archnoble? Schwartz and Weiss were having to rely on three!

In the end, we came to a reasonable agreement: the shumils would remain with the guards, as per our original plan, but would only be activated when someone suspicious arrived at one of the temple’s gates or when a rott signaling the Knight’s Order was fired in the lower city.

Kamil's Baptism

The winter coming-of-age ceremony came and went while I was hunkered down in my workshop, brewing away. The spring baptisms were soon to follow, and of course, I was *very* excited. Kamil was going to attend this year, which meant I would finally have a chance to see him.

"I shall perform this spring's baptisms," I announced.

"Aren't we trying to keep you out of the public eye?" Melchior asked. "I performed the winter coming-of-age ceremony without issue, so you can leave this one to me too!"

Using feystones packed with mana, Melchior had performed the winter ceremony to perfection. It was a great achievement, and seeing how far he had come made me proud to be his big sister—but that didn't mean I'd give up on the spring baptisms. I needed to be the one to bless Kamil.

"Melchior... Could you let me have this one?" I asked. "This will be the last ceremony I perform in Ehrenfest. I wish to make it a special one."

"Your last ceremony...?" he echoed.

"That's right. I wish to bless Ehrenfest's commoners one last time before my departure," I said, adopting the most saintly facade I could muster in an attempt to convince him. I did the same thing with Hartmut, and then with Sylvester, which secured me permission to oversee the ceremony as the High Bishop.

"It saddens me to think this is the last time we will dress you in your ceremonial robes..." Monika sighed. She and Nicola were wearing melancholic smiles as they helped me change for today's ceremony.

"It saddens me as well," I said, watching their practiced movements. "Especially as you both just finished relearning how to dress me..."

For a time, Monika and Nicola had struggled to get used to my new, more

mature body. But because I'd needed to keep wearing these ceremonial robes while waiting for my normal robes to be altered, they had quickly adapted to the circumstances. Now, their hands moved without the slightest hesitation.

"Is Philine dressed yet?" I asked.

"Wilma is dressing her for us. Lady Philine is an apprentice blue shrine maiden now, so she should be leaving for the chapel soon."

Indeed, now that Philine was operating as an apprentice blue, she needed to participate in Spring Prayer. I'd given her the ceremonial robes I'd worn during my own tenure as an apprentice, and alterations had since been made so that they were the perfect length for her. They were still emblazoned with the Rozemyne Workshop's crest, but Philine hadn't seemed to mind. In her words, because she was no longer with her house, the thought of wearing her protector's crest was actually quite comforting. I just hoped that it would help keep her safe.

"There," Monika said. "Everything is ready."

"Let us go, then."

Fran guided us to the chapel. Because I was so much taller now, I was actually able to keep up with him, but that didn't stop him from looking over his shoulder to check on me. He gazed down at where my head would once have been, then noticed his mistake and corrected himself.

"It would seem that I no longer need to slow down for you," he said with a sad smile. It was a simple remark at face value, but I grasped the double meaning: not only was I taller now, but I would also be leaving Ehrenfest soon. My eyes started to water and my nose burned.

"I really don't want to go..."

"Today is your final ceremony, Lady Rozemyne. Come, see how much the temple has improved because of you."

"Because of me...?"

Fran stopped outside the chapel and slowly turned to me. "The gray priests once abandoned in the orphanage have been given work in the printing and

paper-making industries—work that will play a crucial role in the future of our duchy. Visiting commoners are more sincere with their prayers, for they know they will receive true blessings. Nobles come and go without batting an eye, though they each have their own motivations. And of course, the orphanage has managed to produce *its own* nobles with Dirk and Bertram. Our fortunes do not end there, however: having Lord Melchior—a member of the archducal family—as the next High Bishop will ensure the temple’s safety for years to come, and even now, Aub Ehrenfest searches for ways to protect the temple and the lower city.”

Protecting the temple had previously fallen to Ferdinand and me: a noble forced into the temple by Veronica and a former commoner, respectively. That this duty was now falling to one of the archduke’s biological sons was immensely significant—and according to Fran, it had only been possible because of the changes I’d made.

“The High Bishop shall now enter!” came a voice from the chapel.

Fran opened the door for me, then gave me a calm smile as I proceeded inside with my bible held to my chest. The young children were all staring at me in shock, probably because they’d heard so many rumors about the High Bishop being tiny. It was fun to imagine what must have been running through their heads.

As I continued toward the stage, I couldn’t help noticing that the children were so much shorter than me now. They all seemed so tiny and adorable. It really made it clear how much I’d grown.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Hartmut said, then smoothly held out his hand to me. I was tall enough now that I could climb the steps on my own, but I didn’t want to be awkward. I gave him the bible, then took his hand and let him escort me onstage.

“Ah...”

There was a stand in place behind the lectern, but I no longer needed one. Hartmut discreetly moved it while putting the bible in place, his lips curved into a half smile.

Remembering what Fran had said to me, I paused to take in my surroundings.

Things really had changed. Melchior, his retainers, and Philine were all clad in blue. The apprentice blues now attending the Royal Academy were free to join the knights' dormitory in the castle, yet they had chosen to stay in the temple for comfort and to obtain more divine protections, while the gray priests who had monitored the children with hard expressions during my baptism were now standing tall. Even those due to be baptized stood out to me; rather than lazing about and seeming entirely uninvested, they were facing straight ahead with tense looks on their faces. I could already sense how much the general perception of religious ceremonies had changed.

Now, where's Kamil...?

It was customary for the richer children to stand at the front, so he was probably farther back. I used mana to enhance my vision, and mere moments later—

Over there! That's him!

He had the same blue hair as Dad and was unmistakably boyish, yet his facial features reminded me a lot of a young Tuuli. It hadn't taken me very long to spot him, since he was standing with all the other kids from his neighborhood. He also had glossy hair and excellent posture, both owing to his role as an apprentice of the Plantin Company.

Looks like Mom used dyed cloth instead of relying on embroidery.

Baptismal clothes were traditionally embroidered around the edges, but Mom had opted to use her dyed cloth instead. This promoted our duchy's new dyeing method while also emphasizing the connection between Kamil and me. Mom must have wanted to make it easier for me to recognize Kamil, since I'd never properly met him.

I'm sure that using dyed cloth in place of embroidery is going to spread... just not in the way that Mom expects.

The practice would no doubt become popular among mothers who couldn't embroider very well. If I were them, I would desperately cling to it, using excuses like "I'm not being lazy! This is a new trend! Even those working for the archduke's daughter are using it!"

At last, it was time for the ceremony to begin. I read from the bible, taught the children a prayer, and then granted them a blessing.

“O Flutrane, Goddess of Water, hear my prayers. May you grace these newly born children with your blessing. May those who offer their prayers and gratitude be blessed with your divine protection.”

The green light that shot out was slightly larger than usual, but there was no helping that. Besides, it was still several times better than the explosion I’d accidentally created at the end of Tuuli’s coming-of-age ceremony. Repression wasn’t good for the body.

If anyone asks, I’ll give the same excuse that I gave Melchior: I wanted to give a huge blessing as a final gift to Ehrenfest’s commoners.

The doors were then opened, and the children started filtering out of the chapel. I could see my family waiting outside. There was Dad, Mom, Tuuli... and for some reason, Lutz. They were all staring at me in shock—apart from Tuuli, who had already seen me since my sudden growth spurt. She had a triumphant look on her face that seemed to say, “See? It’s just as I told you.”

Mom and Dad continued to stare at me for a moment; then their surprise gave way to overjoyed smiles. They didn’t see my unexpected growth as disturbing—they were just glad to see that their daughter was doing well.

A wave of emotion spread through my chest.

“You didn’t all need to come all the way here!” Kamil exclaimed, sounding embarrassed as he ran over to the others.

Lutz made a remark of some kind about it not being any trouble, then gave Kamil a pat on the head and waved at me. I resisted the urge to wave back and instead broadened my smile.

They’re so far away. So, so far away...

I understood that I couldn’t join my family in celebrating Kamil’s baptism, but still... Watching them made me feel so terribly lonely.

And as soon as those doors close, even these fleeting interactions will be a thing of the past...

Moving to the Sovereignty would mark the end of these little moments. I would struggle just to see my family.



Once the children were all outside, the chapel doors were shut. I couldn't suppress a heavy sigh.

"Your hand, Lady Rozemyne."

Hartmut knew about my family in the lower city. That was why he'd stayed with me until the end, not saying a word. I took his outstretched hand, and together we descended from the stage.

Outside the chapel, my knights were waiting in a line with stern looks on their faces. Cornelius alone took a step toward me.

"Lady Rozemyne, an ordonnanz arrived from the castle. The archducal family is holding a meeting about Ehrenfest's defenses, including their plans for Spring Prayer. You and Melchior have been asked to attend. You are to bring one guard, one scholar, and one attendant each."

It seemed that I wouldn't have time to process the end of my final ritual and the loss of yet another connection to my family. I turned to Melchior, and we both exchanged nods. I would need to think carefully about whom to leave behind to ensure that the temple remained safe in my absence. We couldn't risk exposing it or the lower city to danger right now.

"Cornelius, I shall take you, Hartmut, and Lieseleta with me to the meeting," I announced. "Damuel, Angelica, Matthias, and Laurenz will remain here in case they are needed, while Philine will serve as the orphanage director. Summon Leonore and Judithe to guard me on my way to the castle."

"Yes, my lady!"

Melchior and I instructed the knights we weren't bringing with us to guard the temple while we were away. We also told them to remain in close contact with the knights stationed at the gates. Wilma, Monika, and Nicola would prepare the orphanage director's chambers for Philine while also getting everything ready for Spring Prayer.

"I will contact Damuel if something happens on my end," I said. "Everyone, coordinate sending ordonnanzes to the lower city's gates. If you need to contact the orphanage, send an ordonnanz to Philine. Should an incident of

some kind require the orphans to evacuate, remember our drills.”

“Understood.”

Defense Meeting

As I arrived at the castle, Otilie, Lieseleta, and Gretia came to greet me. “Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne,” they said in chorus.

“Thank you all,” I replied. “Are Roderick and Clarissa in the library, by chance?”

Otilie giggled and said, “Yes, my lady. Clarissa is diligently making fey paper for you while educating Roderick. His brewing skills seem to have improved considerably under her tutelage. It certainly helps that he obtained so much mana through compression, but experience is important as well.”

Clarissa had apparently said to Roderick, “Since you’re Lady Rozemyne’s first name-sworn, you at least need to be skilled enough to do brewing work for her before she leaves for the Sovereignty.” By the sound of things, she was putting him through the wringer.

“I also spent a lot of time in the library with Clarissa,” Judithe noted. “She made me brew a lot too.”

As it turned out, Clarissa had drilled Judithe until the young knight had mastered making her own offensive magic tools—largely weapons she could throw or shoot. Clarissa’s educational philosophy was deeply rooted in Dunkelfelger’s customs, and it sounded extremely harsh.

“Still,” I said, “Clarissa has a point that Roderick will need to be proficient in brewing before he moves to the Sovereignty. I think it’s also important for you to be able to make your own weapons.” I already had my hands full, so to be honest, I appreciated what Clarissa was doing.

“The meeting will take place in the afternoon,” Lieseleta informed me. “Do you plan to take your usual retainers?”

I shook my head. “I want you to attend such meetings with me from now on, Lieseleta. It seems only logical, since you plan to accompany me to the Sovereignty.”

In the past, Ottilie had accompanied me as an archattendant. She received this news with a smile, then nodded and said, “Yes, that would be wise. In the meantime, Gretia and I will continue preparing for your departure. Your belongings here at the castle have already been packed and are ready to be loaded as soon as the royal family sends word. How are things faring in the temple and your library? If there is anything else you wish to bring to the Sovereignty, it should be brought to the castle soon.”

The time had come for me to close my temple’s hidden room and move my luggage to the castle, just as Ferdinand had done before me. Despite how busy I was, the preparations for my move were still going smoothly.

“Roderick’s and everyone else’s brewing has diminished our supply of ingredients in the temple workshop,” I said. “Given the circumstances, rather than replenish them, I shall move what remains to my library’s workshop. As for the rest of my belongings in the temple, I intend to leave the majority of them to Philine, but most of the items to be moved are rather large indeed...”

My luggage to be moved from the temple included mattresses, shelves, and the like—things I would need until the very last moment. Moving them wouldn’t be easy, but at least I wouldn’t be bringing much with me.

“How much luggage will need to be taken from the library?”

“I wrote a letter to Ferdinand asking how many books and ingredients I should take with me to the Sovereignty. The aub sent it to him alongside some food, so now I am waiting for his response. How much progress has been made with my clothes? Will they be ready in time for the Archduke Conference?”

Ottilie nodded. The clothes that everyone’s personnel were rushing to complete were coming along nicely and now needed to be fitted.

“As we do not know what might be decided during the meeting this afternoon, let us arrange a date afterward.”

“Certainly.”

By the time we arrived at the meeting room with our retainers, the atmosphere was already very tense. The archducal couple, their retainers, and

the higher-ups of the Knight's Order all wore stern expressions.

"Ah, there you all are," Sylvester said. "Rozemyne, did you leave some of your guard knights in the temple?"

"Of course," I replied. "We both did, didn't we, Melchior?"

He smiled and nodded. "Rozemyne left four knights. I only left three, but Nikolaus told me he would join them in guarding the gates, since he's an apprentice knight as well."

Karstedt, who was standing in his usual position behind Sylvester, received this news with a slightly relieved smile. Upon hearing about my disappearance, Nikolaus had apparently begun to search for a new protector. In the process, he had spent a lot of time working with Melchior's guard knights, whom he knew from their time together in the temple.

I worried that I'd failed Nikolaus as his older sister, but since my move to the Sovereignty was set in stone and Cornelius still viewed him with suspicion, it was probably for the best that Melchior was helping him in my stead.

"Now, let us discuss Ehrenfest's defenses," Sylvester said. He explained that Georgine likely knew of a way to steal our foundation, that he suspected she would make her move around Spring Prayer, and that he had already finished devising a plan with the Knight's Order.

Wilfried was first to respond: "Father, my retainers who participated in those meetings gave me the same warnings, but is this information truly reliable?"

Sylvester glanced in my direction, then shook his head. "I won't reveal my source, nor can I provide any concrete evidence, but I consider the information highly trustworthy. There's also no mistaking that Ahrensbach—or rather, Georgine—is targeting Ehrenfest. Matthias's intelligence made that clear a long time ago."

Georgine had apparently mentioned taking Ehrenfest's foundation while visiting Gerlach's summer estate. Our bible had then been stolen during the autumn that same year, so we had responded with the winter purge, executing those who were name-sworn to her en masse. It seemed safe to assume that we had quashed her plans at least once.

Sylvester continued, “Crushing her agents here in Ehrenfest and wrecking her information network dealt a heavy blow to her, I would say. Then, last winter, we spread word through the Royal Academy that Rozemyne had taken ill and returned to Ehrenfest, which we believe put Georgine on guard and made her unable to act.”

I could see that being true. Now that Georgine’s intelligence network was in tatters, she was probably having to rely on Ahrensbach students for information about Ehrenfest. Trying to find out whether the news of my return was true would have delayed her considerably.

“Georgine’s attack will most likely come before the Archduke Conference—before Ferdinand can marry into Ahrensbach,” Sylvester informed us. “To appease a royal decree, he was moved into a room in the duchy’s western building. This has made it much harder for him to keep track of my sister. Something is sure to happen before he marries Detlinde and starts operating as a full member of Ahrensbach’s archducal family.”

Nobody else spoke, but we all wore very stern expressions.

“Next, defensive positions. As the aub, I’ll guard the foundation itself. Karstedt and a section of the Knight’s Order will focus on protecting the city as a whole. Bonifatius and another section of the Order will stand ready to aid the knights of any provinces where enemies are spotted.”

The giebels of provinces bordering Ahrensbach had already been warned of the coming danger. They were being highly cautious and were so eager to know what was happening and whether anyone suspicious had appeared that they were gathering intel even from commoners.

“If something does happen,” Sylvester said, “you will all need to take charge of your guard knights and assist with the defense. Florencia and Charlotte will guard the castle; Wilfried, the Noble’s Quarter; and Melchior, the temple and the lower city.”

“So the men won’t be the only ones leading knights into battle?” Charlotte asked uneasily. “I expected to provide support but not to join the fighting.”

Sylvester gave her a serious look. “Yes, Charlotte. That goes without saying. You’re an archduke candidate who strives to become the next aub, aren’t you?

During times of war, an aub must take charge and join the fray.”

There was one job that an aub couldn’t afford to delegate: defending their duchy’s foundation. Anyone who entrusted their foundation to someone else would instantly lose their right to rule, so one could consider it an aub’s most important duty.

“An aub who can’t protect her foundation doesn’t deserve to rule,” Sylvester said plainly. “What do you think your guard knights are for? Use them to defend our duchy.”

Charlotte fell silent for a moment. Then she nodded and said, “Yes, Father.”

Seeing their exchange reminded me of something important: I’d needed to fight when gathering jureve ingredients and playing ditte against Dunkelfelger, so in a sense, I was already used to battle. It didn’t surprise me that Charlotte, who had never fought or undergone knight training before, was taken aback by this new duty being thrust upon her.

This is probably another reason why men are preferred as aubs.

Charlotte had never even touched a blade, so I could see why she hadn’t embraced the upcoming battle as readily as Wilfried, who had been training with the knights since he was little. He had already discussed the city’s defenses with his knights and started running drills, so he knew how to coordinate with the Knight’s Order to defend the Noble’s Quarter.

“Um... You haven’t explained what *I’m* going to do...” I said.

“That’s because I can’t include you in our plans,” Sylvester replied honestly. “If you’re here when it counts, I want you to fill any gaps we might have overlooked.”

“Is that all...?”

“To be frank, we have no idea when the royal family might order you to the Sovereignty. Your future’s so uncertain that I wouldn’t even let the others involve you in our plans for Spring Prayer. Your retainers have complained that they’re spending so much time making offensive magic tools that they haven’t been able to prepare for your departure properly. I want you to focus on that.”

I nodded my understanding. Being able to protect Ehrenfest was important, but so was being ready to join the royal family whenever they decided to summon me.

“I discussed this with Ottilie this morning—we should have everything ready by the end of the Archduke Conference,” I said. “And... although I appreciate your consideration, I want to know what I should do in the event of an attack. At this rate, I’ll just blunder about and cause more problems, don’t you think?”

If we *did* end up being attacked—which seemed very likely—then I wouldn’t be able to sit back and continue preparing for my departure. I wanted a role to play.

“I need instructions,” I concluded. “Do I ask the royals for help? Do I join the battle? Give me something to do.”

“You sure are brave, huh? Have you always been such a warrior at heart?” Sylvester asked, furrowing his brow at me. Unlike my sister Charlotte, I wouldn’t hesitate to charge into the battle.

“Father, she’s been like this for a *very* long time,” Wilfried sighed. “We’re even starting to wonder if she shares Dunkelfelger’s complete and utter obsession with clutter.”

“Wilfried!” I exclaimed. “Don’t even joke about that!”

“Look, I understand that each of those matches was for a good cause, but you’re playing treasure-stealing clutter against them *every single year*. You’re not even part of the knight course, nor do you spend much time at the Royal Academy to begin with. How many other archduke candidates can you say that about?”

Nooo! He’s right! I can’t argue!

“Alright, alright,” Sylvester said, waving a hand at us both. “Rozemyne, if you’re willing to lead your retainers into battle and the attack *does* end up happening during Spring Prayer, then I want you to cover for whoever’s circling the Central District.”

A crucial part of Spring Prayer was traveling around the Central District with our chalice, so Wilfried, Charlotte, and Melchior were going to take turns. I

would remain in my library and at the castle, preparing for my move—but in the event of an attack, I would take the place of whoever was absent.

“As you will,” I said. “How are the offensive magic tools coming along?”

“As you advised, we’re having the knights and students make rejuvenation potions alongside our scholars,” Sylvester replied. Ehrenfest had managed to gather so many ingredients during the Archduke Conference and the Royal Academy term that there was no risk of us running out. “I also sent word to all the giebels, telling them to prepare for battle, and what do you know? Even the retired elders have been doing some real impressive work.”

The elders had apparently told the young knights which traps had worked best during the ditter games of old and the best time to use them, and the generational gap had closed considerably as a result. A greater sense of camaraderie had also blossomed in some provinces, as the Leisegangs and the nobles of the former Veronica faction now had a greater threat looming over them.

“This is the perfect opportunity to unite Ehrenfest,” I said. “People are always more likely to come together when they have a common enemy.”

A threat to the duchy’s foundation transcended disputes between factions and generations, and thanks to the winter purge, there were no longer any nobles name-sworn to Georgine in Ehrenfest. It helped that some members of the former Veronica faction hadn’t been deemed guilty by association and were now swearing their loyalty to the archducal family. As we knew, some had even given their names.

“Oh, right.” Wilfried turned to look at me. “Rozemyne, I was told you’ve been making complex magic tools of some kind. Have you finished them?”

I gave a proud smile and puffed out my chest. “Indeed. I made three shumils to defend the temple’s gates. They are already in place—but for the sake of preserving mana, they have not yet been activated.”

I’d wanted to make the three shumils red, blue, and yellow, taking inspiration from the old *Super Sentai* rangers, but Lieseleta had prepared their fur and chosen three pastel colors instead: pink, aqua, and cream. The shumils were very cute in their ribbon-and-lace-covered uniforms, but that cuteness strongly

contrasted with their combat potential. It was a little surreal seeing them standing with the knights and priests at the temple's gates.

"Melchior's and my knights have been given magic tools to activate them, as have the gray priests standing guard," I explained. "The shumils use the same counterattack magic circle carved into Ferdinand's charms, so they should be excellent defensive assets."

"ROZEMYNE!"

"Wait, what? Ferdinand...?" His voice had suddenly echoed through my mind. I covered my ears, my eyes darting every which way as I tried to gauge what was happening. For a moment, I thought I was simply imagining it... but then a bright rainbow light swallowed me whole.

Danger Beheld

“Huh? Where am I?”

In the blink of an eye, my surroundings had changed. Wilfried and Charlotte had been sitting opposite me a moment ago, but now they were nowhere to be seen.

“This is... a Mana Replenishment hall, isn’t it?” I recognized the pure-white room, the globular object floating at its center, and the complex patterns and characters spinning around it.

“Lord Ferdinand?!” cried a high-pitched voice. “Lord Ferdinand!”

I turned instinctively and saw a blonde girl rush across the room, her face blanched with horror. She was older than I remembered, but I immediately recognized her as Letizia. She came to a stop before Ferdinand, who had dropped to his knees. He was clutching his chest and coughing violently.

Ferdinand...

I sprinted over as well. Getting to him was easy enough, but when I reached out to help him, I couldn’t see my hands. No matter what I did, I wasn’t able to interact with him or Letizia. It almost felt like I was watching a movie. I called out, but they didn’t react at all. It was like they didn’t know I was there.

Ferdinand took something from his potion belt, stuck it in his mouth, and then held out the small cage containing his name stones. His hands were trembling. Sweat dripped down his forehead.

“Give this... to... Justus,” he said, struggling to get the words out. “Tell... him... to go. *Now.*”

Letizia accepted the cage, now white as a sheet, and then ran away. She must have left the hall; I couldn’t see her anymore.

Now alone, Ferdinand collapsed fully. He couldn’t even kneel anymore; he just lay there, making no attempt to get up.

FERDINAND!

I wanted to heal him—to give him the medicine he needed—but there was nothing I could do. His face twisted in pain. He must not have known that I was watching him.

“Ngh!”

He grunted and clutched at his chest, only to grab a fistful of his clothes. On closer inspection, there was a faint rainbow light glowing at his bosom. It wasn’t long before it spread to cover his entire body.

Wait, isn’t that from the charm I gave him?!

I couldn’t actually see the charm, but the glowing mana enveloping him was my own. That much was instinctively clear to me. The faint light spilling out of my charm and enveloping him seemed to be the only thing keeping Ferdinand alive.

Someone! Anyone! Hurry up and save him!

There was nothing I could do but watch. It was agonizing.

“Ngh... Hah...!”

Ferdinand was taking short, shallow breaths when footfalls resounded through the hall. He recoiled at the sound, still grasping his chest, and gracelessly struggled to sit up. Though he managed in the end, his breathing still worried me. He didn’t even have it in him to brush away the hair clinging to his sweat-covered forehead.

I turned to the source of the noise, keeping half an eye on Ferdinand, and saw Detlinde leisurely approaching. She was wearing a long silver shawl that covered her entire body. Ferdinand was clearly in a terrible state, but she sauntered across the room as if she didn’t see him at all, her heels clacking with each step. She exuded not even a trace of concern.

But why?

Her complete lack of shock or panic made my stomach turn. *She* must have done this to Ferdinand.

Stop right there. Don’t you dare get any closer to him!

I stood protectively in front of Ferdinand, trying to block Detlinde's path, but it was pointless; she slid right through me. I'd only further proved that I wasn't actually here.

"Strange," Detlinde said, her brow slightly furrowed. "Lord Leonzio said the poison was instant—that it would immediately turn you into a feystone. So why are you still alive? This is terribly inconvenient for me." Her dark-green eyes contained nothing but scorn.

Did she just say what I think she said...?

"Tell me, did the poison truly reach you?" Detlinde asked. "You *do* appear to be weakened, so perhaps you simply did not inhale enough. Or did you have an antidote ready in your mouth? Letizia was supposed to poison you, then I would merely discover your feystone, but alas—you have somehow managed to ruin my scheme. To think it was all going so well until now. Such a shame." She placed a hand on her cheek, then stared quizzically at Ferdinand. "You know, I *did* promise Lord Leonzio that I would return Lanzenave's feystone."

"Lanzenave's feystone." Coupled with the disturbing look on Detlinde's face, those two words gave me goose bumps. She had just declared that she didn't acknowledge Ferdinand as a human being. Based on what she'd said, I could also guess that this Leonzio person was from Lanzenave.

"Know this, Lord Ferdinand: your secrets have been revealed to me. You are a failure, meant to be turned into a feystone and returned to Lanzenave before your baptism. 'A seed of Adalgisa,' was it? How does it feel to know that your mother did not deem you worthy of even becoming a feystone?"

Ferdinand was desperately trying to stay calm despite his ragged breathing and the triumphant grin bearing down on him, but the truth was clear to see. His past, a matter so sensitive to him, was being callously trampled on.

Detlinde continued, "Oh, how much it would embarrass me, the next Zent, to be engaged to such a creature. That is why I must be rid of you before our Starbinding. Mother gave me her blessing. In fact, she devised this whole plan for me."

None of this made sense. In accordance with a royal decree, Ferdinand was continuously downing rejuvenation potions to save Ahrensbach from its mana

crisis. The duchy's archducal family was too small to manage on its own. How was Ahrensbach going to survive without the one person keeping it standing?

"You... cannot become the Zent," Ferdinand groaned.

Detlinde just laughed. "You might not be aware, but I already know where the Grutrissheit is. Lord Leonzio told me. I shall obtain it with him at my side. Then, once I am the Zent, I will welcome him as my consort. No matter how much you love me, we cannot live together."

Spread across Detlinde's face was a smile brimming with optimism. I didn't know whether it was because she had come of age or because she was dressing up for Leonzio, but her makeup was laid on much thicker than when she'd attended the Royal Academy. Her curved red lips seemed garish to me.

"You... are an aub," Ferdinand gasped. "You dyed... the foundation. You cannot... be a Zent."

"Ahaha! It was not *I* who dyed Ahrensbach's foundation. It was my sister, meaning *she* is the duchy's current aub. I am this country's next Zent, remember. I saw no reason to waste my time."

Detlinde cackled, then placed a hand over her mouth and sneered down at Ferdinand. "Once I take the throne, I shall nullify the decrees of the previous Zent and return my elder half-brother to our duchy's archducal family. I will also be able to return my uncles, who have Benedikta as their successor. Ahrensbach will want for nothing."

Ferdinand wasn't the only one without a place in Detlinde's future—Letizia was also absent. It was plain to see that she was in danger. I didn't know how they had managed to manipulate her, but she would receive the blame for killing Ferdinand.

"Mother has made all the preparations," Detlinde continued. "I do not understand why she desires a backwater duchy like Ehrenfest, but no matter. In her words, her goals will be much easier to accomplish once you are out of the picture. She is awaiting my ordonnanz as we speak."

An indescribable anger blazed within me, aimed entirely at Georgine. She had obtained poison from Lanzenave, manipulated Letizia into using it on

Ferdinand, and then sent Detlinde to confirm the results. Perhaps it was admirable for a noble to accomplish so much without once having to dirty her own hands, but the only emotion coursing through me was outrage.

“Hmm... Mother will give me quite the scolding if I report Letizia’s failure to turn you into a feystone. And you do not seem weak enough to die on your own...”

Detlinde reached down to her hip—and that was when Ferdinand decided to strike. He clenched his jaw and, with a groan, threw several magic tools he had taken from his belt. Barely a moment later, his schtappe was firmly in his hand.

“Eep!”

Detlinde shrieked as an explosion swallowed her and Ferdinand both. The shockwave blew her back a little, but otherwise, she was completely unaffected. The magic tools that had once turned the tide in a dither game against Heisshitze were nothing to her silver shawl.

“As expected,” Ferdinand muttered.

“Goodness! How violent!”

Incensed, Detlinde took something from her belt and popped it into her mouth—one of the Lanzenave sweets Letizia had given me, from what I could tell. She rolled it around on her tongue, then grabbed a bag filled with powder and tossed it at Ferdinand.

Stop!

Ferdinand twisted his body as best he could to avoid the attack, but it was no use; the bag struck the floor beside him, then burst into an all-consuming cloud. His posture crumbled, then he collapsed in a heap. The hand gripping his chest slowly loosened and went limp. Only his light-golden eyes remained firm, glaring intensely at Detlinde even as his other features went rigid.

“The instant-death poison did not work on you for some reason, but this appears to be doing the trick. How strange.”

Detlinde took out the bracelets used to seal the schtappes of criminals, then reached down to put them on Ferdinand. The instant she touched his limp

wrist, however, there was a tremendous *crack*. Detlinde's hand was blown back by a burst of rainbow light.

"Eek!"

She stared at her fingers for a moment, then glared at Ferdinand and tried again, this time wrapping her hands in her silver shawl. The feystone-like bracelets were connected with a chain.

"There. Now you will not pose a threat to anyone, even if you *do* regain control of your body."

Next, Detlinde moved one of her captive's hands onto the magic circle used when offering mana. "A fragile woman such as I could never hope to carry you out of here," she said. "Continue to channel your mana into the foundation until your vessel is empty. My sister, the aub, will surely appreciate it."

She crouched down by the center of the circle and activated it. Ferdinand would continue to have his mana drained unless he managed to move his hand away.

"I wonder, how long will it be before your mana runs dry? I do hope I can obtain the Grutrissheit before then..." Detlinde said. Then she strolled out of the hall, wearing the bright expression of someone who had just completed a good day's work.

Even once Detlinde was gone, the magic circle continued to drain Ferdinand. It must have been sucking mana out of the charm I'd given him too—the rainbow light surrounding him began to fade, as did the glimmer in his golden eyes. Gone were the hatred and anger; now they stared vacantly into the distance.

"Don't give up! Not now!" I screamed, but the world around me had changed. I was back in the archducal meeting room, and everyone was gathered around me with looks of worry on their faces. Ferdinand was nowhere to be seen, nor was the magic circle draining his mana.

Temptation

“Rozemyne, what *was* that?!” Sylvester asked in a hurry. “You shone with rainbow light and then went completely still.”

That explained why everyone was surrounding me, but we didn’t have time. “Sylvester, Ferdinand needs us!” I cried. “He’s dying in Ahrensbach! Lady Georgine manipulated someone to poison him, then Lady Detlinde threw this powder that made him collapse!”

I stood up and tried to hurry out of the room, but I couldn’t reach the door; everyone was blocking my way. Sylvester was even grabbing my arm.

“Let go of me!” I cried.

“Calm down! Your explanation doesn’t tell us anything!” Sylvester put his hands on my shoulders and urged me to sit down. “How did Ferdinand get poisoned?! Do you have any idea how we can save him?!”

All of a sudden, I was being bombarded with questions about what I’d seen—not just from Sylvester, but from Florencia and Bonifatius too. I pushed down the voices telling me to run and did my very best to oblige them. No matter what I decided to do next, I wouldn’t be able to do it alone.

“So in short, Georgine’s invasion is imminent,” Bonifatius finally said. “We must accelerate our plans.”

“How can you focus on *her* at a time like this?!” I snapped. “Ferdinand needs our—”

“Give up on him, Rozemyne. He cannot be saved. He was poisoned in another duchy’s Mana Replenishment hall and is already on the verge of death. Right now, our top priority is Ehrenfest’s foundation. Do not forget that.”

“You want me to... give up on him...?” I clenched my fists, feeling my blood start to boil. Bonifatius was watching me through stern blue eyes.

“You need to protect Ehrenfest. You promised to when Ferdinand moved.”

He was right—I really had made that promise. And to Ferdinand, of all people. Ehrenfest was also home to the Gutenbergs, everyone in the temple, and my family in the lower city. I needed to protect them. But at the same time, I'd also promised to protect Ferdinand. I wasn't about to abandon him.

"In the first place, how do you intend to enter another duchy's Mana Replenishment hall?" Bonifatius asked. "And do you know how many days it would take us to reach Ahrensbach? Ferdinand only has so much mana; we could depart now and still not arrive in time. Focusing on Georgine is the obvious choice."

I stroked Ahrensbach's key. Georgine wanted to steal our foundation, but what was stopping me from taking hers? I could use her own plan against her.

"But say we *could* get there in time," I said. "Would we be able to save him?" I could feel the intensity of my stare and the mana coursing through my body.

Everyone around me gasped and started muttering about empty feystones, but I paid them no mind. Instead, I repeated my question.

"Would we be able to save him?"

Bonifatius grimaced and suddenly recoiled. I might have started Crushing him by accident. I tried to be more careful, but I wasn't going to back down.

"If I can reach Ferdinand before his mana runs out, will you and Sylvester help me?" I asked. "I don't care if it antagonizes Ahrensbach, the Sovereignty, the Zent, or even Erwaermen. I. Will. Not. Give. Up. On. Him."

Bonifatius said nothing in response. He merely swallowed.

"I entered the archducal family to protect the people I care about. My old status and authority weren't enough. In the same sense, I've only agreed to join the Sovereignty so that Ferdinand won't be deemed guilty by association. If we let him die, I won't have a reason to go along with the adoption."

As long as the people I cared about were safe, I didn't care if our entire country collapsed. Ferdinand and my lower-city family meant so much more to me than Yurgenschmidt, so I wasn't going to let any of them die for its sake.

"Rozemyne, are you... Are you sane? You'd do all this for one man?"

“It doesn’t surprise me that you don’t understand. I care about Ehrenfest more than Yurgenschmidt and about my family more than Ehrenfest.”

At last, someone spoke up in my defense: “Look, she knows what she’s on about. If she has a way to save him, we should support her.”

“Wilfried?!” Bonifatius exclaimed.

“We weren’t even sure she was going to be here during the attack, so she isn’t involved in any of our plans. I don’t see a reason why she can’t take her retainers and go. In fact, if you ask me, keeping her here when her mana’s about to explode poses a much greater threat to Ehrenfest’s security.” He turned to me and pointed at his eyes, indicating that the color of mine was changing.

“Rozemyne might be moving to the Sovereignty, but she’s still an Ehrenfest archduke candidate!” Bonifatius protested, clearly stunned. “This is equivalent to us invading Ahrensbach!”

“So? They’re obviously targeting our foundation, which means we have every right to retaliate. Ahrensbach needs its foundation as much as we need ours, right? I say we crush them before they can crush us.”

Sylvester stroked his chin, amused. “Rozemyne, do you have a plan to save him?”

“I do. I’m the only one who can enact it, but your assistance would make things so much easier. Can I count on you, Sylvester?”

Despite being an archduke, Sylvester had refused to give the order for Ferdinand to assassinate Georgine. He had put his brother’s future above the safety of his duchy. There wasn’t a doubt in my mind that he would agree to help me.

Sylvester’s lips curved into a grin. “We’re on the same page. The problem is that you’re still associated with Ehrenfest. Your decision to steal another duchy won’t be received well, so if you’re going to do this, we’ll need an airtight excuse.” His dark-green eyes said that he would support me as long as I could get everyone on board.

“Won’t it be enough to say that we’re rescuing Uncle?” Wilfried asked. “He’s

still registered with Ehrenfest, since his Starbinding hasn't happened yet. And since he was sent there to marry a temporary aub, won't his death be in breach of a royal decree?"

Sylvester shook his head, though he kept his eyes firmly on me. "We don't have enough evidence to sway the Sovereignty or any of the other duchies."

We need an excuse... Think, Rozemyne! Think!

I racked my brain for ideas. We needed a just cause for invading Ahrensbach. This was the one thing keeping me from rushing to save Ferdinand.

"Ahrensbach is welcoming Lanzenave envoys as part of a scheme to depose the Zent," I said. "Lady Detlinde has no desire to cooperate in the royals' search for the Grutrissheit. Instead, she plans to claim it, take the throne, and make Leonzio of Lanzenave her consort."

In isolation, Detlinde obtaining the Grutrissheit wouldn't have been a major problem; as was clear from my current situation, there was nothing wrong with an outsider delivering the book to the royal family. I suspected they would have canceled her engagement to Ferdinand and married her to Sigiswald to minimize the risk of any internal strife within Yurgenschmidt.

However, Ahrensbach was making a fatal mistake. To secure the Grutrissheit, it was fraternizing with a foreign country.

"Ahrensbach's collaboration with Lanzenave is no less heinous than when Eisenreich let Bosgeiz have a word in its ear," I said, wresting an excuse out of thin air. "Ehrenfest was born from Eisenreich's fragmentation, so we know better than most the severity of uniting with another country for the sake of stealing the throne. As the Zent's future daughter, of course I would want to eliminate Ahrensbach. Rather than criticize my actions, the Sovereignty and the rest of the country should praise them."

Sylvester smirked. "Heh... Not bad. There's one glaring issue, though: Ehrenfest is no match for Ahrensbach. We don't even have the manpower to invade them. You and your retainers would need to venture alone into enemy territory."

Ahrensbach, which oversaw half of Old Werkestock, had an impressive

population. Ehrenfest, in contrast, was considered small even for a middle duchy. There was an obvious disparity in strength; we would struggle enough just staying on the defensive and trying to protect our foundation.

“So be it,” I said. “Invading with too great a force would only draw attention to us.”

“No, I can’t let you go to Ahrensbach without proper reinforcement,” Sylvester replied with a frown. “Now that you’re set to be adopted by the Zent, we need to protect you above all else.”

How was I to overcome our blatant disadvantage? I paused in thought; then Otto’s voice reverberated through my mind. “If you’re struggling on your own, hire someone to do the work for you,” he had once said to me. “Find someone capable and guide them into doing whatever it is you want of their own volition.”

If we didn’t have enough strength, we would need to source some from elsewhere. And when it came to strength, there was only one duchy in Yurgenschmidt that immediately came to mind.

“Sylvester,” I said, “please contact Dunkelfelger. I wish to extend to them an invitation to play ditte. They will assist us in saving Ferdinand and smiting Ahrensbach for its treason.”

“Dunkelfelger? You’re dragging other duchies into this?!”

Under normal circumstances, a duchy trying to steal a foundation would never request external assistance. It was unsustainable, for one thing—a duchy that couldn’t seize a foundation on its own stood no chance of maintaining it—and working in collaboration increased the odds of additional wars. But we weren’t fighting to take Ahrensbach; I just wanted to save Ferdinand. Weakening our enemy would simply be a bonus.

“If we want to stand a chance against a greater duchy like Ahrensbach, we’ll need to use everything at our disposal,” I said. “Dunkelfelger is unmatched when it comes to ditte, right? If we don’t make use of that now, we never will. Aub Dunkelfelger and his first wife should agree to lend us their aid as long as we present my excuse, though we could also leverage the royal decree they thrust upon Ferdinand and the Clarissa incident for good measure.”

“Alright, come with me,” Sylvester conceded. “You can do all the negotiating. Florencia, Bonifatius, take over in my absence. Make sure everyone here is sworn to secrecy.”

And so I was taken to the archduke’s office. Sylvester spoke to his scholars, then asked them to prepare the magic tool used to communicate with other aubs during emergencies. It looked entirely like a water mirror. I already knew how it worked as a result of my archduke candidate lessons, but only aubs could actually use them.

Sylvester connected with Dunkelfelger’s tool, and a scholar on the other side summoned the archduke.

“Aub Dunkelfelger,” I said. “Good day to you.”

“Aub Ehrenfest and... Lady Rozemyne?! I thought you were unwell. Just what is going on here...?”



Just as we could see the aub in the water, he must have been able to see us; he was staring in shock at my new, mature form.

I cleared my throat and said, “We are here to discuss a matter of grave importance.” Of course, our most noble excuse took precedence, so I opened with an outline of the threat facing Yurgenschmidt: Ahrensbach had joined forces with a foreign country and was planning an attack on the Sovereignty.

“As one of the duchies that used to be Eisenreich, Ehrenfest knows the danger of treason better than most,” Sylvester added in support of me, his expression hard and serious. “Thus, we are requesting the aid of a greater duchy to protect the royal family.”

Georgine believed she was acting in secret, so she could never have predicted that we would turn to greater duchies and the Sovereignty to protect our foundation. The groundwork we laid today would play a crucial role in diplomacy moving forward.

“Moreover,” I said, “trug has been used twice within the Sovereign Knight’s Order. We find ourselves reluctant to rely on them, which is why we instead turn to a greater duchy that has pledged to support the royal family.”

We planned to warn the royals as well, but it was hard to say whether we could trust the Sovereign Knight’s Order. Dunkelfelger had experienced both the ditler interruption and the incident during Ahrensbach’s funeral, so rather than dismissing our claims as nonsense, the aub simply nodded.

I continued: “This is a more personal matter, but I must also ask that you send knights to Ahrensbach as well as the Sovereignty.”

The aub blinked at me, then said, “For what purpose?”

“To put it simply, I wish to invite your entire duchy to play ditler.” A smile spread across my lips. “Would your knights be interested in a *true* game?”

“‘A true game’? So there are foundations at stake...?”

“Indeed,” I replied. It was nice to speak with someone who had good instincts; it made things so much easier. “A large-scale ditler match between Ehrenfest and Ahrensbach is about to begin. As you can imagine, our duchies

are far from balanced in terms of manpower, so we cordially invite you to join us. One cannot speak about ditler without thinking of your duchy.”

I gave a refined chuckle as I watched the aub through the water. My request had rendered him speechless.

“Ehrenfest will protect its own foundation,” I explained. “Meanwhile, I shall take a small group to claim Ahrensbach. I would appreciate your support in this endeavor; everyone knows that your duchy is the strongest ally one could wish for.”

I could tell the aub was wavering. Wearing a broad smile, I continued to push, waiting for him to crack.

“Given the current political climate, I would venture that not even Dunkelfelger has participated in a ditler match with foundations on the line. Have you never wished to experience one?”

“Ngh...!”

“As I said, this is going to be a *true* ditler match, with Ehrenfest and Ahrensbach as the playing field. I can promise the most exciting battle you have ever experienced, far greater than any mere game. Do you know what I mean, Aub Dunkelfelger? Can you think of anyone who might wish to join me in attacking Ahrensbach’s foundation?”

Despite his wavering heart, the aub shook his head. “Only knights would agree to join a war between other duchies. Nobody else.”

Only knights, huh?

That was somewhat exasperating... but also convenient. “So excitement is not enough to convince you,” I said with a smile. “I suspect you need *a reason* to join the fray.”

At once, the aub leaned closer. “Do you have one for us?” His eyes were so hopeful that I couldn’t help but grin.

“Revealing these circumstances will turn our humble request into blackmail, so I was hoping to convince you through your passion for ditler alone... But I suppose I do not have a choice. Forgive me for what I am about to say.” I cast

my eyes down, trying to look as sad as possible, and said, “Though I cannot elaborate at this moment in time, Ferdinand is poisoned and paralyzed in Ahrensbach’s Mana Replenishment hall. He is dying at the hands of none other than his own fiancée, Lady Detlinde, and my intention is to save him. No matter the cost.”

“He’s *what?!?*”

“Only by taking over Ahrensbach’s foundation can we rescue him. Your duchy came together once already to free him from Ehrenfest’s temple; I assume it will unite again to save his life?”

“Not a soul will dispute this opportunity to right our past wrongs. Very well, Lady Rozemyne! We shall participate in your foundation-stealing match against Ahrensbach!”

He’s... smiling. He’s actually smiling. Aub Dunkelfelger, it might be wise to take a step back and reevaluate your priorities.

Faster than Steifebrise

“So, Lady Rozemyne, what do you need us to do in this ditter match?” the aub asked, not even attempting to hide the glee in his expression. We would only be borrowing from the knights who volunteered to participate, which meant a meeting was in order.

“I shall take control of Ahrensbach’s foundation as quickly as I am able,” I said. “In the meantime, I would ask that your volunteers distract the Ahrensbach Knight’s Order in the sky above their castle.”

“Oh? You would make them decoys, not your vanguard...?”

“Indeed. Only those who have dyed Ahrensbach’s foundation will receive access to its Mana Replenishment hall, and time is already of the essence. I shall need to dye the foundation in one go and then enter alone, which is why I will require a diversion.”

Even as we spoke, Ferdinand was being drained of mana; I couldn’t waste any time while dyeing the foundation. Registration feystones would also be needed to enter the Mana Replenishment hall, and registering those who weren’t in my family would delay me too long.

“My objective is to save Ferdinand,” I said. “But to do that quickly and with minimal risk, I need your help. I do not mean to destroy Ahrensbach or my enemies... but of course, if you wish to take their foundation as a trophy once our job there is done, consider it yours.”

I planned to dye the foundation by downing a string of rejuvenation potions, but I only needed it to enter the Mana Replenishment hall; I wouldn’t hesitate to surrender it once Ferdinand was safe and sound. Maybe someone else would claim it next, but you’d need to be a madman to want to rule a duchy wrapped up in high treason.

“Not a chance,” the aub replied. “I want nothing to do with a duchy fated to earn the Sovereignty’s ire, and Ahrensbach’s scheming with Lanzenave is a

veritable death sentence. My role here is simply to mete out punishment.”

Oh, is that so? I really thought Dunkelfelger would want it, since securing the enemy’s foundation is the victory condition of a ditler match... But evidently not.

“Lady Rozemyne,” the aub continued, “as we have promised to support you during this match against Ahrensbach, we shall do everything in our power to help you dye their foundation.”

“I am grateful,” I replied. Asking for Dunkelfelger’s assistance had been the right call; they always went full throttle when it came to ditler.

“Now, when will the ditler bells ring?” the aub asked, openly eager to get started.

“As far as I am concerned, they sounded the moment Ferdinand was poisoned,” I replied with a smile. Either we would rescue him and win or he would run out of mana. “I will commence the assault as soon as Dunkelfelger is prepared. How quickly can your volunteers be ready?”

Our own knights had spent an entire month training for this battle and brewing all sorts of useful magic tools and potions. They were ready to mobilize at a moment’s notice. My retainers were no exception; they had already decided which of them would accompany me and would set out as soon as I sent the word. We were just waiting on Dunkelfelger.

“Hmm... We only have so much time, correct?” the aub asked, stroking his chin. “Do we need to attack during the day?” He was facing me but staring into empty space, focused entirely on the matter at hand.

“Not at all. Attacking at night should save commoners from being caught in the cross fire. I would also like to move under cover of darkness, if we can.”

Although I planned to reach Ahrensbach’s foundation through its temple, I still wanted to keep casualties to a minimum. If anyone tried to stop me from saving Ferdinand, I would simply wrap them in bands of light. It wouldn’t be a pleasant experience for the victims—nobody wanted to be on the receiving end of a noble’s schtappe—but it was better to leave someone terrified than dead.

“Save commoners...” Aub Dunkelfelger muttered. “Under cover of darkness...”

“My opinion might change when I see how Lanzenave’s soldiers and the Ahrensbach Knight’s Order are positioned, but right now, I would ask that you keep the fight in the sky above the Noble’s Quarter. I want no harm to come to the general public. That said... this is only a request. The only absolute in this operation is that we *must* rescue Ferdinand.”

The aub’s gaze finally returned to me. “How long do you expect this match to last?” he asked, still stroking his chin. “That will determine how much needs to be prepared.”

“It should only take me one bell to pin down the foundation, but I cannot yet say how long I will need to save Ferdinand.” If we could get in touch with Eckhart and Justus, sneaking into Ahrensbach’s castle wouldn’t be too hard. It was a pretty big if, though; I didn’t know whether Letizia had spoken to them, nor what Ferdinand had meant when he had told them to “go.” In the worst-case scenario, they might have been imprisoned as well.

If only we knew where in Ahrensbach’s castle the Mana Replenishment hall was located... Ah! Aurelia might be able to tell us!

I’d racked my brain for someone we could consult, and a single name had come to mind: Aurelia, who had moved away from Ahrensbach to marry Lamprecht. As the late Aub Ahrensbach’s niece, she had to be at least partially familiar with the castle’s layout. I wasn’t going to have the mother of a young child participate in battle, of course, but we could at least ask her what she knew.

“Aub Dunkelfelger,” I said, “make whatever preparations you will need to fight for two bells. Ehrenfest has magic tools and rejuvenation potions ready to be distributed and shall restock any used during this match.”

“Rozemyne,” Sylvester chastened, “don’t just make grand promises. Negotiate properly.” I understood why he was so bothered, since it was Ehrenfest’s money on the line, but I shook my head in disagreement.

“Consider this a necessary expense to cut down on our negotiation time,” I replied. “You have nothing to worry about, in any case; we are only heading to Ahrensbach at my selfish request, so I shall cover these costs with my own funds. Nobody can complain about us saving Ferdinand with the money he left

behind.”

I mean, I wouldn't mind using the money I earned, but something tells me Ferdinand would try to pay me back five times over.

“Compensation can come later, though,” I said. “More pertinent are a number of warnings about the coming battle. To begin with, Ahrensbach is bound to be using Lanzenave’s silver cloth, which is practically immune to mana attacks.”

From there, I went through every danger I could think of. I doubted that Ahrensbach or Lanzenave would be using schtappes, which meant this was going to be a very abnormal ditler match.

“To conclude: bring weapons that aren’t made from schtappes, cover your mouths with cloth to block whatever poisons our foe might use, and prepare rejuvenation potions, antidotes, and jureves as necessary.”

“Heh. If we need nothing else, we can have our volunteers ready before the date changes.”

That's so quick! Or, wait... Does he mean everything's prepared already and the only time-consuming part is going to be picking who gets to go?

The aub continued, “I expect all preparations for going to the Sovereignty to be completed around the same time. Allow me to make one thing clear, though: we will act only when the royal family instructs us to. Moving of our own volition would only see us branded as traitors.”

“We understand,” Sylvester replied.

It didn’t matter that Dunkelfelger had honest intentions; no good would come from them arriving at the Sovereignty unannounced with a massive army. Of course they would wait to receive permission.

“We shall inform the royal family that we have requested your support,” Sylvester said. “It should go without saying that this is a most unusual situation; with our opponent working in tandem with Lanzenave, I expect we will see discord even within the Sovereign Knight’s Order. I plan to seek aid from the other greater duchies as well—but in this endeavor, I must ask you to support us. We do not have the connections to convince them alone.”

The aub's eyes glinted with amusement. "We can do that for you, though I should warn you—it will prevent Ehrenfest from taking full credit for this operation."

"We cannot do this without your help. If you wish, we will cede *all* of the credit."

"Oh?"

Having been prompted to continue, Sylvester cast his eyes down a little. "If we rescue Ferdinand, can you imagine what the consequences might be? Perhaps this attempt on his life was made because he learned a grave secret—in which case, we could expect our foes to unify in a desperate attempt to finish the job. Ahrensbach nobles will need to obey Rozemyne once she obtains their foundation, but the same cannot be said of those from Old Werkestock, who will remain unrestricted and volatile. I suspect that once Rozemyne rescues Ferdinand, Ehrenfest will have its hands full preparing for Ahrensbach's next move. Though we can advise greater duchies to join the fight in the Sovereignty, we won't be able to participate ourselves."

In short, while Ehrenfest could provide aid, we would not be able to join the battle proper.

"Old Werkestock..." Aub Dunkelfelger repeated with a grimace. "A troublesome place indeed. Though we oversee much of its land, we cannot treat its people as our own." The emotion in his voice made it clear that he was struggling to manage his part of the former duchy.

The aub then looked at me head-on, a bitter smile on his face. "History shows that stealing a foundation is easy. The hard part is what comes next. That's why *true* ditter matches rarely take place." There was an unmistakable glimmer in his eyes as red as Lestilaut's.

To rule, the new aub would need to transport personnel, resources, and money from their original duchy to their new one. That fact alone explained why battles over foundations only happened in extreme circumstances. It also emphasized why Ehrenfest claiming the foundation of a much larger duchy was the peak of recklessness.

"I am eager to see what you will do upon obtaining Ahrensbach's foundation,"

the aub said with a provocative smile. “For us, this is merely a chance to experience a true ditter match, but your involvement will not end once Ferdinand is safe. You will need to manage Ahrensbach—and if worse comes to worst, Ehrenfest will crumble.”

He couldn’t have been clearer with his warning: if we wanted to back out, now was the time.

I returned a smile, not wavering for a moment. “I am well aware of our situation, Aub Dunkelfelger. Do enjoy the show.” Before the next Archduke Conference, I was due to become the king’s adopted daughter and obtain the Grutrissheit. My newfound authority would allow me to redraw duchy borders and place new foundations; no way was I going to let Ehrenfest fall.

“I like the resolve in your eyes. I like it a lot. My one regret is that we didn’t get you into Dunkelfelger. Now, Lady Rozemyne—where am I to send the volunteers?”

“I shall meet them at your country gate when the date changes. Please open your border gate and have them wait nearby.”

“Our country gate?! That must mean...”

I said nothing to the wide-eyed aub. My only response was a sly smile.

“I see...” he said. “Hah. HAHHAHAHAHA! So *that’s* what’s going on here! Now you’ve really caught my interest!”

“Upon my arrival, I shall take those who are present and nobody else. As I’ve said many times, rescuing Ferdinand is my victory condition. I will need to steal Ahrensbach’s foundation faster than Steifebrise the Goddess of the Gale.”

Aub Dunkelfelger clenched his right fist and tapped it twice against his left breast, brimming with excitement for the upcoming battle. “Hear! Hear! May we be faster than Steifebrise!” Then he faded out of sight; the communication line must have been closed.

Sylvester was still facing the pool of water, but I could feel him giving me the side-eye. “You’re a pretty decent motivator...” he said.

“I didn’t play all those ditter games against Dunkelfelger for nothing. Their

ceaseless passion will play a key role in our victory.”

Sylvester gave a hesitant smile. I could sense that he was a little uneasy, but we now had a powerful ally on our side. Our conversation with Dunkelfelger had produced the best possible result.

“I will need to coordinate my departure with my retainers...” I mused aloud. “Oh, but I must contact the royal family and the greater duchies before then.” Having so much to do was intolerable when I wanted to leave as soon as possible, but I understood deep down that this groundwork would prove crucial. I needed to warn the royals that something bad was happening and that we were seeking help from Dunkelfelger and the other greater duchies.

“You’ve already come up with a good excuse for our actions and secured us Dunkelfelger’s support; let me deal with our remaining correspondence as the aub. You’re heading out at the dead of night, so your focus needs to be on making sure you’re ready. Don’t let sleep dull your senses this time.”

I fell silent, remembering how I’d needed to fight back sleep while battling the goetze. A nap and a wake-up potion were going to be necessary.

Sylvester went to shoo me out of the room, but an ordonnanz flew in before he could. “This is the teleportation hall,” it said. “We have an urgent message from the Royal Academy for the aub: Eckhart and Justus have arrived at the Ehrenfest Dormitory and are asking to meet with you. They are currently waiting in our tea party room. What should we do?”

Sylvester and I exchanged glances as the ordonnanz repeated its message twice more and turned into a yellow feystone. How had they made it here when they were supposed to be in the belly of the beast?

I can’t imagine Aub Ahrensbach gave them permission to teleport.

As I pondered the situation, a thought occurred to me—Ferdinand must have prepared something in advance. His telling them to “go” had probably meant “go to Sylvester.” Perhaps he had devised this plan so that he could immediately contact Ehrenfest if something happened. There was a lot to digest here, but the fact that Eckhart and Justus were at the Royal Academy to begin with meant that Letizia had managed to reach them after bursting out of Ahrensbach’s Mana Replenishment hall.

Sylvester frowned so hard that his eyebrows almost touched above his nose. “To be honest, Rozemyne, I was hoping that you were somehow mistaken about all this, but now we have irrefutable evidence. Those two would never leave Ferdinand unless they absolutely had to.” He made his schtappe, then tapped the yellow feystone to turn it back into an ordonnanz. “I’ll make my way to the Royal Academy to welcome them as soon as I finish contacting the royal family.”

As the archduke, only Sylvester could make the brooches necessary to enter the Ehrenfest Dormitory. It was also up to him to decide whether to let Eckhart and Justus back into our duchy. The situation wouldn’t be able to progress unless he went there personally.

Once the ordonnanz had disappeared again, Sylvester turned to me. “Rozemyne, what’s your next move?”

Me? I want to go to the Royal Academy too. I can’t face waiting any longer. I need to see that Eckhart and Justus are safe with my own two eyes, then grill them for as much information about Ferdinand as I can get.

“I’ll continue getting ready for the battle and prepare whatever Eckhart and Justus might need,” I said. “Tell them to come to my library once you’ve finished speaking with them. In our endeavor to rescue Ferdinand, I can’t think of two more valuable allies.”

I gave Sylvester two rejuvenation potions to be given to our visitors, then turned on my heel. It was time to direct my retainers.

Epilogue

Detlinde and Ferdinand were absent for the Interduchy Tournament and graduation ceremony when Lanzenave's ships appeared at Ahrensbach's country gate. The envoys customarily arrived after the Archduke Conference, so they were an entire season early.

"It would seem they wish to petition the royal family to overturn last year's decision in advance of the Archduke Conference," said Roswitha, Letizia's head attendant.

Letizia's brow furrowed. "Is it not the case that the border gate can be opened only by those who have dyed the foundation? I assumed it would stay closed in Lady Detlinde's absence."

"It shall. Strahl will ask them to leave."

Strahl was Ahrensbach's former knight commander, relieved of duty by Detlinde for being "too annoying" and "refusing to listen." He now served Ferdinand as a guard knight.

"I hope they leave before Lady Detlinde returns," Roswitha said, making no attempt to hide her exasperation. "Lord Ferdinand may be her partner by royal decree, but he is from another duchy and does not have the authority of an aub. No matter how much he might chastise her, he will not be able to intervene. Only she has the authority to decide whether that gate is opened."

Letizia nodded. Detlinde had an unhealthy attachment to Leonzio of Lanzenave. If she found out he was here, she would open the gate for him in mere moments, and they would all be forced to witness another slew of unbearable sights. Most of Ahrensbach's nobles were openly disgusted by how much Detlinde was belittling and disrespecting her fiancé, who had come to Ahrensbach by royal decree and was personally overseeing the majority of the duchy's administrative duties.

"If only her mother, Lady Georgine, could keep her under control..." she

muttered.

“Lady Georgine spent a long time as a third wife and did not speak on the aub’s work even after becoming his first. She speaks only of the aub’s reputation and does not concern herself with the management of the duchy.”

Georgine believed it best to let the aub come to her own decisions. She warned Detlinde about abandoning her duties but said nothing about her alliance with Lanzenave.

“Although Strahl was relieved as commander, he still holds a great deal of influence within the Knight’s Order,” Roswitha said. “We have nothing to fear while Lady Detlinde is absent.”

The situation had taken a very unfortunate turn: nobles allied with Detlinde had sent her word of Lanzenave’s arrival, stubbornly insisting that the Knight’s Order shouldn’t disregard the aub’s wishes in her absence. Of course, Detlinde had rejoiced at the news and swiftly returned to open the border gate, completely disregarding her schedule in the process. Ferdinand was visiting his mentor’s laboratory to help Raimund with his research, so nobody had been able to stop her.

“I apologize that my father could not prevent this,” said Fairseele, Strahl’s daughter and Letizia’s apprentice attendant. She was usually so confident in her father’s talents, but now her eyes were downcast.

“Do not look so down, Fairseele. There was nothing Strahl could do. The Knight’s Order does not have the authority to refuse those with the aub’s invitation.”

The Lanzenave Estate had opened early—in winter, not spring—and several carriages had arrived filled with presents for the royal family. The port was crowded with silver ships going to and fro.

Also among the cargo being brought into Ahrensbach were several gifts for Detlinde. Leonzio was delivering them personally while visiting the castle for the usual exchange of greetings, a fact which delighted their recipient. The way he smiled sweetly at her, dropped to one knee, and gave her a jeweled ornament made the exchange look entirely like a proposal.

As a foreigner, he simply must not understand our culture.

Such was the mindset one had to adopt to stomach what was otherwise an unbearable sight. In Yurgenschmidt, it was unthinkable to remove one's engagement feystone to wear a neck ornament from another man, but revealing that fact would only embarrass their guest and cause a stir. Letizia's only option was to hold her tongue.

"And these are for Lady Letizia," Leonzio said before presenting the girl with a familiar silver tube and colorful sweets. "It would seem you quite enjoyed last year's presents."

Letizia had just run out of the sweets Rozemyne had given her, so she gratefully accepted the gesture with a polite, "I thank you ever so m—"

Before she could finish, she was pushed aside by Detlinde.

"Fear not, Lord Leonzio," the stand-in aub began. "This time, I shall do everything I can to make the Zent understand your country's circumstances."

Leonzio nodded and replied, "I sincerely appreciate your concern."

Detlinde was adamant about bringing Lanzenave and the royal family together to negotiate, and the scholars caught up in the process were being dragged every which way. Ferdinand in particular was busier than ever, since he was having to make the necessary arrangements.

Letizia took a quiet step back as Detlinde and Leonzio launched into an energetic conversation.

"Lord Ferdinand, what were the conclusions for Spring Prayer?" Letizia asked when he visited to grade her work. He had once again been tasked with circling the duchy for Spring Prayer, but with Lanzenave's envoys now wandering all over, he had seldom been able to leave the castle. According to Roswitha, the foreign presence had even inspired an emergency meeting in the main building.

"As I understand it," Letizia continued, "Lady Georgine's suggestion was approved: the giebes were given small chalices and sent back home at the start of spring."

Georgine had made the proposal for two reasons: there were now proven benefits to performing religious ceremonies, and entrusting the chalices to giebess freed up the blue priests to focus on the Central District and improve the duchy's harvest. The giebess would ensure the chalices' safe delivery to their respective provinces, and they had more mana besides. Ahrensbach's nobles had celebrated the idea, for it really would improve their yield of crops.

"Indeed," Ferdinand replied with a bitter frown. "Lady Detlinde ordered that the giebess be given small chalices and sent back to their provinces immediately after the feast celebrating spring."

"I am told you were strongly against the idea," Letizia said. Then she nervously asked, "Was there a serious reason for that?"

"The small chalices are themselves divine instruments to be used in ceremonies. Few people know how to properly work with them, but even then, there is a serious risk of them being used maliciously. As for what a bad actor could do with the chalices... I cannot tell you at this moment in time."

Ferdinand was exhausted. No matter how much he protested or tried to reason with Detlinde, she would use her authority as the archduchess to do as she pleased. And guess who was tasked with minimizing the damage she caused.

"My apologies," he continued. "Until this meeting between Lanzenave and the royal family has been dealt with, I will not be able to tutor you. Please complete these tasks in the meantime. I shall ask Sergius to collect them when they are due."

Ferdinand then stood up and briskly took his leave—much earlier than usual, Letizia noted. Tears welled up in her eyes as she looked upon the mountain of work she had just received. She was spending more time completing tasks than being tutored these days.

"I am out of the sweets Lady Rozemyne sent me, and it gets tiresome being all alone in my room..." Letizia muttered. She had been told to avoid any unnecessary encounters with Lanzenave's envoys and was consequently holed up in the northern building. Her only opportunities to leave were for Mana Replenishment; she wasn't even allowed to eat in the dining hall without

Ferdinand there to supervise her.

“Lord Ferdinand is merely trying to protect you from poison,” Roswitha explained. Letizia understood that much, but it still felt like he was imprisoning her.

“Speaking of which,” the head attendant continued, “it would seem that Lady Georgine is preparing to visit Old Werkestock’s giebes to ensure they are performing the ceremonies correctly. It gladdens me to hear they aren’t just being left to their own devices.”

Letizia lowered her eyes. “In truth, I was somewhat looking forward to Spring Prayer. It was an excuse to venture outside my room, if nothing else.” Last year’s ceremony had ended up being a unique and interesting experience as well as a rare and precious opportunity to leave the castle, so she couldn’t help resenting Georgine for stealing it from her.

“My, my... I, on the other hand, feel *relieved* that I do not need to participate. That ritual would demand such an unreasonably large portion of my mana.”

Letizia puffed out her cheeks. It wasn’t a very appropriate gesture for an archduke candidate, but it helped ease the frustrations swirling around within her, and she knew it was minor enough that Roswitha would overlook it. The head attendant merely said, “That look does not suit you, milady...” before proposing that they have tea in the garden.

Ahrensbach’s nobles had all requested meetings with their foreign visitors, which had delayed the feast celebrating spring by several weeks. By the time it had actually taken place, Spring Prayer had been right around the corner. The giebes had been given their small chalices and shooed out of the castle almost as soon as the feast concluded, and as the socializing nobles had departed, it had become more common to see Detlinde and the Lanzenave envoys wandering through the castle.

“Fairseele, is Roswitha still not back yet...?” Letizia asked, having climbed out of the bath and started getting ready for bed. Just after dinner, the head attendant had gone to speak with her son, Sergius, about reducing her lady’s workload. Sergius served Ferdinand as an attendant, so it stood to reason that

she had gone to him.

“So it would seem,” Fairseele replied. “Perhaps Lord Ferdinand is struggling to make time for the discussion.”

“Or perhaps she and Sergius are using this opportunity to reconnect” came another suggestion.

Despite her attendants’ attempts to console her, Letizia went to bed with an uncomfortable weight on her chest. Roswitha’s absence made her terribly uneasy.

Morning came, but Roswitha was still nowhere to be found. Not even when Letizia’s retainers formed a search party were they able to ascertain her whereabouts. A quick consultation with her son, Sergius, revealed that some servants had seen her discussing the following day’s meals in the kitchen, but nobody had seen her since.

Barely able to breathe from the stress, Letizia looked up at Fairseele, who seemed equally as worried. “An entire day has passed,” she said. “I shall request a meeting with Ferdinand to obtain permission to search the main building.”

Ferdinand agreed to the request, but the date he proposed was five whole days away. Letizia couldn’t wait that long—not when someone so dear to her was missing. Roswitha had stuck with her from Drewanchel to Ahrensbach; in a sense, she was like a second mother to Letizia, who had needed to leave her blood mother behind in the adoption. Not knowing where she was made the girl extremely anxious.

“Lord Ferdinand might be busy, but we can still speak with Sergius, can we not?” Letizia asked, not wanting to delay her search a moment longer.

“That sounds reasonable enough,” Fairseele replied. “If you are consulting him about his mother’s whereabouts, he should be able to make time for you.”

In response to the new suggestion, Ferdinand arranged for Sergius to meet with Letizia that very same day. Despite how busy he was, he was doing his utmost to be considerate of her concerns.

“Sergius, we do not know where Roswitha has gone,” Letizia said, explaining the circumstances. “Please look for her. Lord Ferdinand has told me to stay away from the main building.”

“Understood,” Sergius replied. “I shall speak with Lord Ferdinand to see if he can spare a moment. To think she has gone missing... I can only hope this is a false alarm.”

That night, Letizia received an ordonnanz from Sergius: Ferdinand would meet her tomorrow in the Mana Replenishment hall and inquire about the situation then. She appreciated the news, but it did very little to ease her nerves; Roswitha had been missing for two days now. Letizia suspected that she had either collapsed somewhere or gotten wrapped up in something dangerous.

Roswitha, please be safe...

It was still dark out when Letizia awoke with a scream; Roswitha had come to her in a nightmare, begging to be saved. She sat up in bed, already in a cold sweat, and called out to her dearest friend, hoping Roswitha would rush into the room and assuage her fears... but another attendant arrived instead.

Morning came before Letizia could get back to sleep. Her thoughts were a blur, and as she ate breakfast, a dull throbbing drummed against her skull. She had tasks to attend to, but it was no use; try as she might, she couldn't find the motivation to work.

“Lord Ferdinand might not listen to your request if you do not finish the work he assigned you...” Fairseele warned.

Ah, she's right! This is serious!

Letizia let out a tiny shriek, shook her head in an attempt to refocus, and then dived straight into her work.

Come fourth bell, Letizia sat down for lunch, disregarding Fairseele's warning that she should eat more slowly. Impatience had long since taken hold. She

wanted to go to the Mana Replenishment hall as soon as possible, so waiting for her retainers to finish eating was agony.

“Let us hurry, Fairseele.”

“No matter how much you rush, Lady Letizia, you cannot enter the hall without Lord Ferdinand.”

To enter the aub’s office where the doorway was located, one had to be an archnoble or higher with blood ties to the reigning archduke or archduchess. For that reason, Letizia’s retinue for the day was made up entirely of archnobles.

“Oh my. Letizia,” Detlinde said. “On your way to supply mana?”

On her way to the aub’s office, Letizia had come across Detlinde and Leonzio, who were enjoying some tea on the main building’s second floor. A nearby balcony overlooked the city and the ocean both; the pair had deliberately chosen such a public meeting spot to demonstrate that they weren’t doing anything wrong or worth hiding.

Did they have lunch together, by chance?

Letizia became increasingly annoyed at the thought that Detlinde was spending her days relaxing while pushing more and more work onto her fiancé. Ferdinand was so terribly busy that he couldn’t even scrape together enough time to discuss Roswitha’s disappearance.

The more time passed, the more Letizia’s frustrations grew, but she couldn’t just continue on her way. She greeted the pair, then gave Leonzio her thoughts on the sweets.

“I am glad to have given you some reprieve,” Leonzio replied. “You seem ill at ease; is something the matter? Here—these sweets will raise your spirits.” He gave a kind smile, then presented some of the sweets he was enjoying with Detlinde. Like the ones he had originally brought as souvenirs, they looked very similar to feystones.

Is my concern for Roswitha that obvious?

Embarrassed that someone had seen through her, Letizia swallowed down her impatience and accepted the sweets. Refusing would only have angered the pair, in any case.

Fairseele tried a sweet first, checking it for poison; then Letizia had one as well. The initial taste was the same as that of the sweets she'd eaten before, but as the confectionary melted in her mouth, a sudden, lingering bitterness spread across her tongue.

"Lady Letizia," Leonzio said, "what happened to cause you such trouble? I must hear whatever concern is responsible for that frown on your pretty face. Simply voicing one's concerns can do wonders to ease them."

Letizia's focus moved away from the bitter taste as she focused on Leonzio's question. Simply discussing her worries would do nothing to assuage them. She was also terribly distracted by Detlinde—rather than interjecting as she normally would, the stand-in aub was merely watching in silence, fixing Letizia with a piercing stare. It was unsettling.

"I am about to discuss the matter with Lord Ferdinand, so you need not worry about me. I thank you ever so much for your concern, though."

Letizia then asked for Detlinde's permission to leave. She wanted to escape the conversation as quickly as she could; the longer she spent speaking with Leonzio, the worse Detlinde would treat her when next they met.

"Ah, before you go..." Leonzio took out a silver tube. "Might I suggest using *this* when you consult with him? You told me he listened to your request the last time you used one, did you not?"

Letizia blinked a few times, surprised that Leonzio remembered. She had mentioned it only in passing while visiting the Lanzenave Estate. Touched that someone would show her such consideration, she expressed her thanks and accepted the tube. Fairseele would carry it for the time being.

I wonder, will this tube really convince Lord Ferdinand to search with me...? Yes, I'm sure it will.

Feeling like she had just found a light in the darkness, Letizia continued on her way to the aub's office. Eckhart and Justus, Ferdinand's two most trusted

retainers, were waiting outside; as archnobles of Ehrenfest, they had no relation to Aub Ahrensbach and thus could not enter during Mana Replenishment. Their presence was a show of devotion, if nothing else—most retainers in their position would simply wait in their rooms.

Strahl and Sergius must be inside, so these two could easily have taken a break.

Letizia headed through the door to find Strahl, Sergius, and several of her tutor's Ahrensbach retainers—all recognizable faces, she was glad to know. Her frustrations with Detlinde ran deeper than she'd thought.

"Strahl, is Lord Ferdinand waiting inside?"

"Yes, my lady. He just went into the hall. I know Mana Replenishment is an arduous task not meant for someone of your young age, but I pray for your success."

Letizia nodded in response, then went to retrieve the silver tube from Fairseele. The attendant hesitated and glanced around the room.

"Lady Letizia, what is that?" Sergius asked, his tone sharp. "Is it necessary for Mana Replenishment?"

Letizia took the toy from Fairseele and presented it, trying to hold together the best smile she could muster. "This is a negotiation tool that should convince Lord Ferdinand to join our search for Roswitha. She... She *is* still alive, isn't she?"

There was a short pause before Sergius replied, "She is somewhere in this building. Ordonnanzes still travel to her, but they fly through too many locked doors for us to work out her exact location."

Roswitha hadn't once responded, but at least she was still alive. Letizia wanted to hurry to her rescue, but she was forbidden from leaving the northern building and wouldn't be able to unlock the doors on her own; only Georgine and Ferdinand were in a position to borrow the keys from Detlinde.

"Lady Georgine is absent for Spring Prayer, so Lord Ferdinand is our only hope..." Letizia said. "I was able to convince him with one of these before, so..."

“Yes, I remember Lord Ferdinand taking a particular interest in its design.” Sergius knelt and crossed his arms. “It gladdens me to know you are so intent on helping my mother.”

Letizia directed the attendant to stand. “It is nothing worthy of your gratitude. I simply cannot live without Roswitha.”

And so, with the silver tube in hand, Letizia entered the Mana Replenishment hall. Ferdinand must have heard her footsteps, as he turned around, presented her with a feystone, and said, “Let us begin.”

“First, there is something I must say. If you help us search for Roswitha, I shall give you this.”

She held out the toy with a bright glimmer in her eyes, but Ferdinand shook his head. “I thoroughly investigated the last one you gave me,” he said. “They are of no interest to me now. And in any case... it would be wise to give up on Roswitha.”

What...?

Letizia found it surprising enough that Ferdinand wasn’t interested in the tube, but being told to give up on her head attendant was harrowing. She had mentioned during her move to Ahrensbach that Roswitha was like family to her, so she had never expected such a cold response.

“My apologies, but could you repeat that?” Letizia asked, wide-eyed. “I must have misheard you.” She wanted to believe it was some kind of mistake—or if not, convince him to rethink his stance—but her hopes were dashed when Ferdinand gave the same response, this time with a cold stare: he did not want the silver tube, and she should give up on Roswitha.

“You can’t be serious...” she uttered. “I could never give up on Roswitha. Please, Lord Ferdinand, help me search! Ordonnanzas still travel to her, and she seems to be somewhere in the main building! She’s Sergius’s mother—she’s family to one of your retainers—so please...”

Ferdinand sighed and rubbed his forehead as if dealing with a disobedient child throwing a tantrum. “Sergius has reported that any ordonnanzas sent to her head to an assortment of locked rooms—rooms I do not have the authority

to open—so we are unable to pinpoint her exact location. Moreover, this is an obvious trap. Those responsible *want* you to attempt a rescue. To minimize the harm that comes from all this, you must give up on her.”

Letizia couldn't accept what she was hearing. She *needed* to save Roswitha. Yet her desires were being completely disregarded.

Roswitha!

As the world around her suddenly began to fade, she squeezed her eyes shut and clenched her teeth. The bitter taste from the sweet Leonzio had given her still lingered in her mouth, and it brought to mind something he had said: “Might I suggest using *this* when you consult with him?”

Using... the tube...?

The words echoed in her mind over and over again. Her head started to spin, and her thoughts blurred.

I need to use the tube. Yes, it all seems so clear to me now. He will not listen to me unless I use it.

Obedying the message in her head, Letizia gripped the silver tube and stared up at Ferdinand. He looked at her in turn, his handsome face cold as ice, and then bent down to give her a feystone as though he had already forgotten about Roswitha.

“If you have calmed down, Lady Letizia, then let us begin Mana Replenishment.” He reached out to her. “That toy will only get in the way, so allow me to hold on to it.”

No! If he takes it from me, I won't be able to persuade him! I won't be able to save Roswitha!

Panicking at the thought, Letizia yanked on the string attached to the tube. “Please, Lord Ferdinand—help me save Roswitha!” But what came out the end wasn't a burst of petals or even a shower of sparks; instead, there was a cloud of white dust.

What is this powder...?

Letizia was too distracted to notice, but Ferdinand grimaced immediately. He

pulled up his cape to cover his mouth, shouted, “Do not breathe it in!” and thrust his hand against her shoulder.

“Eep!”

Ferdinand had struck too suddenly for Letizia to react; she was thrown backward a short distance before landing on her bottom. Barely an instant later, an intense light began radiating from his chest, coming from beneath his clothes.

“Rozemyne...!”

What...?

The rainbow light was so dazzling that Letizia forgot all about the dull ache racking her body. Stranger still was how Ferdinand had reacted: he had suddenly clutched at his breast and choked out Rozemyne’s name. Letizia wasn’t sure why he had said it here, of all places, but at the same moment, the light shining from his chest converged into an even brighter pillar.

What’s happening...?

The light enveloped Ferdinand, then slowly began to spread through the entire hall. Letizia was covered too and immediately felt more composed, as if all the darkness clouding her mind had suddenly been cleansed.

“Lord Ferdinand?!”

She didn’t know what had caused it, but she could tell that Ferdinand was in immense pain. He had dropped to his knees and was coughing violently.

“Lord Ferdinand!”

Letizia raced over just as Ferdinand took something from his potion belt and forced it past his lips. He then worked to unlock a small golden cage, though his hands trembled and sweat dripped from his brow. Something was clearly wrong, but Letizia didn’t know what to do. She looked around for someone—anyone—who might be able to help.

“Give this... to... Justus,” Ferdinand sputtered. He could manage only a word or two between coughing fits, and the look in his golden eyes spoke to a man well past his limits. “Tell... him... to go. *Now.*”

Yes, perhaps his most trusted retainers would know what to do! Letizia took the cage, spun around, and sprinted toward the exit. Even as she went, Ferdinand continued to urge her away between gasps.

What's happening? Why is Ferdinand in so much pain? What was that rainbow light? Someone, please tell me!

Her heart beating frantically and painfully in her chest, Letizia dashed out of the Mana Replenishment hall.

"Lady Letizia?!" her retainers cried, surprised to see her alone. "Have you finished supplying mana already?!"

"Please open the door," she said, continuing to run even as her legs shook and her knees threatened to buckle. "I am in a hurry."

Eckhart and Justus were among those waiting outside, and they turned to look at Letizia the moment she appeared. She met their gaze, then extended the cage to Justus, whom she knew better. Inside were a feystone and three white cocoons, all rattling around.

"Lord Ferdinand, he... he said to go..." Letizia wheezed.

The two retainers froze; then Justus snatched up the cage. As he intently stared at it, he mouthed the words "Lord Ferdinand..."

Eckhart's sharp, unblinking eyes were still trained on Letizia. "You," he said. "What have you done to Lord Ferdinand?"

"Eep...!"

He looked calm, but something about his expression was unsettling. His voice was quiet, but it came out much lower than usual. Letizia knew at once that she was being viewed as an enemy. She fell silent, racked with terror, sensing that she was mere moments from her demise. And as she began to waver, Eckhart raised a hand.

"Eckhart, what are you doing to Lady Letizia?!" her guard knights demanded.

"Interrogating her. I need to know what she did to Lord Ferdinand in the Mana Replenishment hall. Only members of the archducal family can enter. Therefore, whatever happened, she must be the culprit."

“You accuse her of a crime?! This is outrageous! What madness has consumed you?!”

Letizia’s guard knights forced themselves between Eckhart and their fearful charge, brandishing their weapons. Eckhart took out his schtappe in response, ready to fight, but Justus grabbed him by the collar and roared, “ECKHART! Forget this interrogation! Our orders come first, and what did our lord tell us to do?!”

“He told us to... *go*,” Eckhart replied.

“Then we’re departing at once,” Justus said, now white as a sheet. He glared at Letizia and the door to the aub’s office, then turned on his heel and sprinted away.

Eckhart was gritting his teeth, but he put away his schtappe and followed. They appeared to know what “go” meant, but Strahl and Sergius exchanged confused glances. Ferdinand must not have shared the command with all of his retainers.

“Sergius, Strahl, apprehend those two,” said one of Letizia’s knights. “We need to know the reason for their sudden aggression and determine what Lord Ferdinand meant.”

Strahl and Sergius nodded, then gave chase.

“Lady Letizia, what in the world happened...?” Fairseele asked upon her charge’s return to the office. “Is something wrong with Lord Ferdinand?”

Letizia parted her lips to answer, but no words came out. She didn’t know what to say. Eckhart’s accusation and the look on his face kept floating through her mind.

I did this...?

She racked her brain, growing desperate. She had used the silver tube in hope of persuading Lord Ferdinand, but had it really been the cause of his agony? If so, why hadn’t she also doubled over?

“Lord Ferdinand has yet to leave the hall,” Letizia said. “I will return to see how he is doing.” But as she went to move, she heard footsteps approaching.

“My, what is the cause of all this fuss?” came a voice from outside the room.

“Lady Detlinde?” asked one of the knights guarding the door. “What business do you have here?”

“Lord Ferdinand and Lady Letizia are currently supplying mana,” added the other, likewise trying to prevent her entry.

Those inside the room also took action, assuming defensive positions around their lady.

Letizia looked at her retainers, then at the door to the Mana Replenishment hall. There was no escape.

“Lies,” Detlinde snapped. “Lord Ferdinand’s retainers just raced off, and Letizia is right there in the office.” She pushed past the guards, bringing along her retainers and several silver-clothed envoys. Leonzio was beside her, holding a silver tube and wearing a handsome smile.

“Lady Letizia,” he said with a smirk. “You consulted with Lord Ferdinand, I assume?” He mimed pulling the string of the toy in his hand, and with that, Letizia finally understood—she really was to blame. She had allowed Leonzio to trick and manipulate her.

“Lord Leonzio, what have you done...?”

“Lady Detlinde,” he said, “the situation is exactly as it appears: Lady Letizia has murdered Lord Ferdinand. Might I ask you to retrieve his feystone?”

As Letizia stood rooted to the spot, still processing the accusation, Leonzio escorted Detlinde to the entrance of the Mana Replenishment hall. “It pains me to force such a duty upon you, my lady... but this must be done for the sake of our future.”

“Goodness me. You are such a worrywart,” Detlinde replied. “Not only am I equipped with your presents, but I am also fated to become the next Zent. Now then...” She took in a breath. “Everyone, capture Letizia. She has murdered my fiancé in breach of a royal decree.”

Detlinde giggled as she slid a registration feystone into the door before her, then stepped into the hall. Letizia knew in her heart that Ferdinand was still

inside, in agony because of what she had done.

I must help him!

But when she tried to chase after Detlinde, Leonzio grabbed on to her arm. “You heard Lady Detlinde,” he said to the others. “Capture her!”

“Watch your mouth!” one of the guards shouted. “Lady Letizia has done no such thing!”

The knights all turned their schtappes into weapons, while the gathered envoys narrowed their eyes and took out silver blades. The tension in the room was palpable.

Leonzio continued, a smile plastered across his face, “We can all see what took place here. Lady Letizia grew sick of the brutally strict education forced upon her by her Zent-appointed tutor, so she decided to murder him. She waited until they were alone in the Mana Replenishment hall, then took his life unopposed.”

“That isn’t true,” Letizia protested. “I don’t hate Lord Fer—”

“You made your frustrations more than clear at the Lanzenave Estate and during tea parties,” Leonzio continued in a bright voice. “Many have heard you bemoan his refusal to reduce your workload no matter how much you ask.”

Detlinde’s retainers expressed their agreement.

Fairseele had turned ghostly white, but she protectively threw her arms around Letizia. “Don’t be ridiculous. How could Lady Letizia even hope to harm Lord Ferdinand?”

“Like this,” Leonzio said, then pulled the string attached to his silver tube. Another cloud of white powder shot into the air, and a loud clatter resounded through the room.

“Eep!”

In the blink of an eye, everyone but Letizia, Fairseele, Detlinde’s retainers, and the envoys had turned into feystones.

Letizia’s mind went blank. This wasn’t at all like what had happened with Ferdinand. She knew deep down that the feystones littering the floor were her

retainers, but she couldn't bring herself to accept it. Her throat seized up as if she had forgotten how to breathe, and a loud ringing filled her ears.

"Goodness, Lord Leonzio, what a cruel liar you are..." Detlinde sighed, returning from the hall with a hand on her cheek. "Lord Ferdinand was not a feystone at all. We will need to wait quite a while longer."

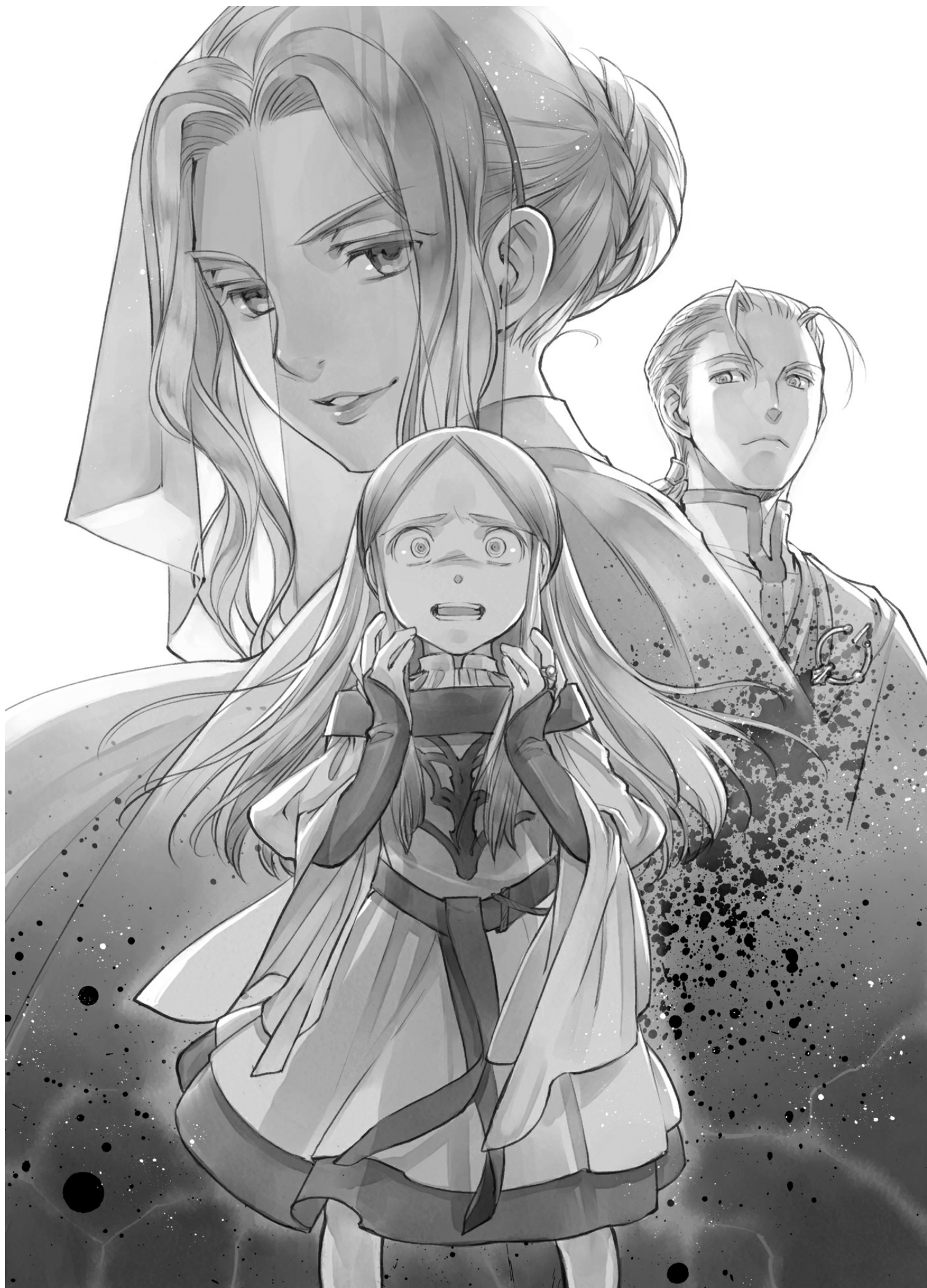
"Oh?" Leonzio blinked in confusion. "What state was he in, then? The poison worked on the others, as you can see."

Detlinde held up a hand, urging him to be silent, then gazed down at Letizia with her usual smile. She looked so nonchalant, like she couldn't see the feystones scattered across the floor.

How can she smile like that? How?

Through chattering teeth, Letizia attempted to protest: "L-Lord Ferdinand will —"

"Lord Ferdinand is dead," Detlinde cackled. "And *you* are to blame."



Confronted with the harrowing truth, Letizia crumpled to her knees. Her strength had vanished so suddenly that she could no longer stand. Though she hadn't done it on purpose, the fact remained that she had poisoned Ferdinand. Even now, she could recall in excruciating detail the terrifying looks on Eckhart's and Justus's faces; their eyes had naturally blazed with anger.

"We discovered your murder and will punish you in due time," Detlinde continued, her tone now performative. "Such is the fate you deserve, is it not? Assassinating the fiancé of your duchy's next aub is a grave crime indeed."

At last, the situation was laid bare: Georgine had created the exact circumstances necessary for her scheme, and Letizia had played right into her hands.

"Your crime is worthy of immediate execution," Detlinde said. "But fear not, Letizia—as an act of compassion, I, the next Zent, shall allow you to live. Assuming that you spend the rest of your days in Lanzenave, that is. I will even send your retainers and the ladies on your side to join you. Your lives will be spared as long as you never show your faces here again." She waved a hand. "Now... take her away."

Right on cue, the group from Lanzenave moved to capture Letizia and Fairseele.

"Lady Letizia! Run!" Fairseele shouted. She tried to resist, but her schtappe-made sword was useless against the envoys, dressed in silver as they were.

Letizia and Fairseele were up against eight of Detlinde's guard knights and more than a dozen envoys; escaping had always been a pipe dream. They were immediately caught and restrained.

"Now that I am rid of all obstacles, I can finally obtain the Grutrissheit," Detlinde said in a singsong. "I must inform Mother that everything has gone according to plan." She then marched out of the room, inspiring her entourage to follow. Their two bound prisoners were also dragged along.

"Lady Letizia?! Fairseele?!"

Before the group could get very far, they crossed paths with Strahl and Sergius. The two retainers were meant to be pursuing Eckhart and Justus, so

why they had returned was a mystery. They drew their schtappes the moment they saw what was happening.

“Lady Detlinde?! What are you doing to them?!” Strahl demanded.

A shiver ran down Letizia’s spine. Strahl and Sergius were about to make the same mistake her retainers had made before being turned into feystones. At this rate, they would meet the same end.

“No, Father!” Fairseele cried. “Schtappes do not work against them!”

“They have poison that instantly turns people into feystones!” Letizia added. “Run! Save the others!”

“Silence!” the envoys shouted. They threw punches at their two prisoners in an attempt to silence them, but it was too late; the most important information had already been conveyed. Strahl and Sergius both leapt back and immediately fled.

“Oh, how much easier this would have been if we had managed to eliminate Strahl then...” Detlinde sighed. She gave Letizia a sympathetic yet mocking look. “I would advise you not to play such tricks again, Letizia. You will only regret it.”

Letizia was taken to a section of the main building she had never seen before. Detlinde stopped before one of the many doors around them and unlocked it. There were muffled groans coming from the other side.

An area filled with locked doors...?

Letizia gazed around and saw many other doors, most of which seemed largely unused. As a sickening sense of unease spread through her chest, she noticed that Detlinde and Leonzio had disappeared into the newly unlocked room.

All of a sudden, the quiet groans stopped, and a deafening silence filled the air. Letizia’s heart beat frantically in her chest, and she lost all feeling in her extremities.

“You asked Lord Ferdinand to search for Roswitha, did you not?” Detlinde said, her red lips curving into a wicked grin. “How sweet of you to care about your retainers.”

Leonzio then dropped a multicolor feystone at Letizia's feet. It landed with a light clatter before rolling across the floor.

"Roswitha was much too loud," he said. "We could never have taken her to Lanzenave while she was making such a racket, so we decided to compromise. How could we not have, when you were willing to *murder* Lord Ferdinand to rescue her? Rejoice, Lady Letizia, for Lanzenave will now welcome you and Roswitha both."

"Ah... Ah..."

Letizia's throat closed. As she stared at the feystone before her, she started seeing red. She could no longer maintain her noble facade.

"NOOOOOO! ROSWITHAAAAAA!"

Letizia screamed at the top of her lungs, wailing to no end, but there was nobody around to save her. As her vision went dark, her head was filled with Detlinde's shrill laughter.

Rozemyne's Disappearance and Return

"Prince Sigiswald," Rozemyne said to me, "I must go up to the second floor for a moment to supply a magic tool."

We had just finished the first of the Royal Academy's Dedication Rituals, and now I was about to observe the donation of yet more mana to the library. Rozemyne had some business to attend to upstairs—she had climbed up to the second floor with her retainers, following the guidance of the shumil magic tools—so I moved to the first floor's reading room for the time being.

The library's storage room for magic tools was cramped. At the very least, it had not been designed to accommodate royals and archduke candidates with their crowds of attendants. Not all of my retainers were able to enter with me.

"For someone who has classes to focus on, Rozemyne certainly does supply the library with an abundance of mana," I observed.

"Indeed," Solange replied. "If not for her generous donations, it might have fallen into disuse by now. I am ever so grateful to her."

We were discussing Rozemyne's role here at the library when a minor clamor was heard on the floor above us. Cries of surprise reached us, drawing my attention upstairs, only to fade a short while later.

Soon enough, two blue-robed individuals returned to us. One was Hartmut, the High Priest of Ehrenfest. The other I did not know. As they both knelt before me, Hartmut made a regretful appeal.

"Prince Sigiswald, my sincere apologies, but Lady Rozemyne has asked to be given some reading time. The ceremony has now concluded, and today is Earthday—under normal circumstances, this would be her day of rest. Klassenberg and the Sovereign temple will take charge of the cleanup while I perform final checks as High Priest. Might I ask you to grant my lady's request for a brief reprieve?"

Rozemyne had come to the library on business—and with a prince, no less—

so I struggled to believe she had dropped everything to read. It was true that she had a shockingly rude tendency to block out the rest of the world once absorbed in a book, but she possessed at least a modicum of reason before picking one up. Something must have happened—something they did not wish to mention in front of Solange and my retainers.

“I shall permit Rozemyne to read,” I said. “In return, I must ask you to accompany me to the Farthest Hall to perform the final checks.”

“Understood. Damuel, take care of the rest here.”

The other blue priest—Damuel—nodded and returned upstairs.

After gathering my retainers and saying farewell to Solange, I exited the library with Hartmut. We had just started toward the central building when I gave him a sound-blocking tool and said, “Now then, what happened to Rozemyne?”

“She vanished while supplying mana.”

I swallowed the urge to ask what madness he was spouting and smiled. “She vanished, did she? Is there nothing more you can tell me?”

“The two shumils claimed she was taken to ‘Gramps.’ I asked for more information, since I did not recognize the name, but they told me only that he is someone old and powerful. Does the royal family know any more about him?”

Hartmut was looking ahead of us and wearing a smile so as not to arouse my retainers’ suspicion, but his emotions were thoroughly disturbed; I could sense an overwhelming enthusiasm bubbling within him. He did not seem to be lying. In the first place, he had no reason to lie to a member of the royal family.

“Do you know when Rozemyne will return?” I asked. “Did the magic tools say anything?”

I would not normally have cared about such a tale, but Rozemyne was special: she had agreed to join the royal family in the spring and obtain the Grutrissheit for me. That we had lost track of her was immensely problematic.

“I do not,” Hartmut replied. “She might be gone for days, or she might have already returned. In any case, Ehrenfest would rather this matter be kept

secret. We intend to claim that Rozemyne collapsed from exhaustion shortly after the Dedication Ritual and that she is currently bedridden.”

“I shall inform only my father of what truly happened to her,” I said. “We will preserve your secret until next Earthday.” If she remained missing for over a week, we would need to hold a family meeting. She was *that* important to us.

Hartmut thanked me, evidently relieved to have been given more leeway.

By the time we arrived at the auditorium, the Sovereign temple had finished cleaning up. I got to work sealing the Farthest Hall while Hartmut looked around as a representative of the nobles.

That night, I told my father about Rozemyne’s disappearance and Ehrenfest’s intention to disguise it as a bout of illness. He sighed in response, a frown creasing his brow; we did not have enough information to come to any decisions.

“If she really could return at any moment, then it would be wise not to cause a stir,” he said. “We shall act as Ehrenfest desires.”

We concluded our discussion by agreeing that if she did not return by the following Earthday, the date of the mednoble Dedication Ritual, we would gather with the rest of the royal family to discuss her disappearance.

An entire week had passed. Still, Rozemyne was nowhere to be seen.

My first course of action was to speak with Hildebrand, who was eager to participate in his first religious ceremony. I gave him clear instructions to ask Ehrenfest about Rozemyne’s health. Then I told Anastasius and Eglantine that I wished to speak with them after dinner. Eglantine had given birth to a girl at the end of autumn and was already overburdened, so allowing her a chance to eat first seemed wise.

Nahelache had given birth to a son during autumn last year when she was still my first wife. Eglantine’s pregnancy had come to light half a year later as the result of a most bizarre occurrence during the Archduke Conference; while praying at one of the shrines, she had received a message from a divine voice

informing her that she was with child. It had instructed her to stop praying—for she was expending her mana and placing a burden on her body—and then returned the mana she had given up in the form of a blessing.

Great care had been taken to keep Eglantine's pregnancy a secret, but the revelation had thrown the royal family into disarray. Her mana duties had subsequently been given to Nahelache, who had completed the minimum amount of nursing for her child, and Adolphine, to whom I was now married. She had also been forbidden from circling the shrines so that she could pour mana into her child.

To keep the birth of her new child a secret, Eglantine was still carrying out her professorial duties at the Royal Academy. She was receiving some support from Nahelache, who was teaching a few grades in her stead, but her postpartum aches meant she was still struggling with her workload.

Nonetheless, Eglantine had ardently wanted a child; I considered it only natural that she should need to work hard. Nahelache had needed to welcome Adolphine as my first wife while carrying my firstborn son; then she had needed to hurry back to her administrative duties because of Eglantine's pregnancy. I would not listen to Anastasius's complaints about his wife having too much on her plate.

In truth, I wished that Eglantine and Anastasius had waited for Adolphine and me to have a son before conceiving a child of their own. At the very least, I thought, they should have waited for Rozemyne to join the royal family and obtain the Grutrissheit. Then we might have had more royals available to supply mana.

It certainly is worth celebrating the royal family's growth, but Father is much too soft.

If not for the abundance of mana we were securing this year by holding multiple Dedication Rituals and the revelation that Rozemyne was close to obtaining the Grutrissheit, Eglantine's pregnancy would not have been good news. If nothing else, I was relieved she had given birth to a girl. Aub Klassenberg was already doing everything in his power to increase his duchy's strength, so if she had given birth to a boy instead, he probably would have

pushed to make Anastasius the next king.

The royal family was weak without the Grutrissheit—but in an era that had no Grutrissheit at all, we were forced to put on airs nonetheless. If Eglantine truly wished to halt Klassenberg’s ambitions and bring stability to Yurgenschmidt, it would have made more sense for her to postpone having a child.

Though I recognize that this is almost entirely Anastasius’s fault, how can I not blame Eglantine too? She was the only one who could have stopped him.

Over dinner, Hildebrand reported on the day’s Dedication Ritual. The divine instruments had indeed shone, but the flow of mana hadn’t been strong enough for the statues wielding them to shoot out pillars of the seven divine colors as they had with Rozemyne. Hildebrand was making his disappointment perfectly clear, but he was still glad to have finally taken part in a ceremony.

Once we had eaten, Anastasius and Eglantine joined us. We royals cleared the room of our retainers and took hold of sound-blockers; then I informed everyone of Rozemyne’s disappearance. I conveyed that she had abruptly vanished on the library’s second floor and that, according to the two shumils, she had gone to see someone called “Gramps.”

“What?” Hildebrand asked, his eyes widening. “Rozemyne isn’t actually bedridden?”

I shook my head. “Ehrenfest asked us not to cause a stir. Speaking of which, what did they say during today’s ceremony?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary... They told me that Rozemyne was still unwell and that they appreciate our concern.”

In other words, they intended to continue lying about her disappearance.

“Eglantine, how was the Royal Academy?” I asked. “Did anyone there know the truth about Rozemyne’s absence?”

“No, I do not believe so. Everyone merely accepted that she was once again bedridden. Well, except for Professor Fraularm, I suppose. She was quite adamant that such a prolonged bout of illness was abnormal.”

Who was Fraularm again? I searched my memories and recalled one professor who was particularly hostile toward Rozemyne. Ahrensbach could do to send us more respectable teachers.

Though the same goes for Ehrenfest.

I was also reminded of Hirschur and her unilateral focus on research, which in turn reminded me of the Sovereign nobles we had sent back to Ehrenfest. It was a duchy we knew shockingly little about—our divergent perspectives made it hard to tell what they were thinking—but we would most likely obtain some valuable intelligence this year.

Eglantine continued, “Lady Rozemyne’s absence has not caused any notable changes within the Royal Academy. Certain individuals are more worried than others and even sent personal letters of concern, but she was sickly to begin with and tended to hurry back to Ehrenfest as soon as she was finished with her classes. Her absence seemed normal, if anything.”

Lady Rozemyne was a strange honor student; she skipped so many classes that it was more unusual to see her attend one. Some students rarely ever saw her.

“Though many duchies are attempting to socialize with Ehrenfest to meet her, once again, Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte are the only ones participating.”

It truly was a year like any other—and despite the circumstances, Ehrenfest’s students were largely unaffected. Over a week had passed since one of their archduke candidates disappeared, yet they seemed fairly nonchalant.

“We should discuss our next move in the event that Rozemyne does not return,” Father said, looking downcast. The royal family was currently acting on the assumption that she would obtain the Grutrissheit for us, but if our plan fell through, we would need to change our approach.

My father and I lacked the divine protections of the primary gods, meaning we would need to circle the small shrines and pray. This was much easier said than done, however. Zent candidates of the past had used the entirety of their time at the Royal Academy to accomplish such a feat, whereas we would need to balance it alongside our usual work. Furthermore, the smaller shrines had been made not by a Zent but by a historic figure who had wished to help those

lacking elements to reach certain gods. As a result, some were broken, some contained only statues, some were hard to find, and some seemed not to have been made at all.

Father had obtained the protections of several subordinates by repeating the protections ritual, but I had obtained only two.

On top of that, I will not be able to reach the Grutrissheit without circling the larger shrines.

My situation made me appreciate what great heights Rozemyne had managed to reach. She truly was extraordinary. That she had managed to create seven pillars of light during her Dedication Ritual without even breaking a sweat was enough to make one's head spin.

"Eglantine," Father said. "In the case that Rozemyne does not return, you will need to begin circling the shrines as soon as you are no longer required to personally feed your baby."

"Father," Anastasius protested at once, "that is too great of a burden to place on Eglantine, and Klassenberg—"

I raised a hand to stop him. "Now that we can finally see a path to the Grutrissheit, are we not obligated to follow it? If we are unfortunate and Rozemyne does not return by the melting of the snow, we will need to take matters into our own hands. Eglantine is the only one among us who is already omni-elemental."

"Perhaps, but she has just given birth," Anastasius said scathingly.

Father gazed at him for a moment, then gently shook his head. "If we do not know Rozemyne's whereabouts by the end of the Archduke Conference, I will command Eglantine to take action. By that point, she will not need to personally nourish your daughter. You would also do well to remember that Nahelache returned to work early to support her. Now, that debt must be repaid. It will be Eglantine's duty as a member of the royal family to circle the shrines."

"I shall do as you ask, Zent Trauerqual," Eglantine replied with a nod and a smile. "That said, I do hope Lady Rozemyne returns soon. I would find it terribly sad if another student came first-in-class this year."

If she did not return to class, her three-year streak would come to an end. The very thought was unfortunate. Even now, I could remember the proud smile she had given when attending the awards ceremony for the first time last year.

“If she does not return before the Dedication Ceremony for laynobles, then let us speak with Ehrenfest,” I said. “We will need to discuss their plans moving forward and what they wish to do about Rozemyne’s classes. That duchy is strange enough that I sincerely doubt we would ever be able to guess their intentions.”

Anytime we acted according to normal noble standards, they treated it as bothersome. Even now, I did not have the slightest idea of what they wanted us to do. Rozemyne was soon to become a royal, but she and Ehrenfest would end up being unknown elements within our family. Even trying to give her orders would be complicated, considering that she was the one due to obtain the Grutrissheit. It would take a lot of very cautious trial and error for us to figure out how to navigate the situation.

Must I marry her...?

Rozemyne was pretty and overflowing with mana, *and* she was a Yurgenschmidt noble... but try as I might, every attempt I made to reach a mutual understanding with her ended poorly. Not even her temple upbringing could explain her uncanny and quite simply bizarre nature; there was something fundamentally unique about her way of thinking. Her culture, as it were, was nothing like those of the country’s nobles and the Sovereign temple. Facing her down in private had made that more than clear to me.

At this point, I could only agree with Anastasius that Rozemyne could not be given power; Yurgenschmidt would inevitably descend into chaos.

The laynobles’ Dedication Ritual came and went, but there was still no sign of Rozemyne. It was finally time for us to meet with Ehrenfest, so we invited all the blue-robed nobles who had participated to a tea party ostensibly celebrating their contributions. Because we had extended invitations specifically to the blue-robles, although Rozemyne’s retainers and Ehrenfest’s archduke candidates were invited, Klassenberg’s students were not.

Rozemyne's retainers, now wearing noble attire rather than blue robes, entered the room behind Wilfried and Charlotte. Their group comprised Hartmut, Cornelius, Leonore, Angelica, and four students. They seemed tense about participating in an event hosted by royalty but exuded neither concern nor anxiety.

We performed our greetings, demonstrated that nothing was poisoned, and then used an area-affecting sound-blocker so that we could start discussing Rozemyne.

"She has been missing for quite some time," I said. "Are you not worried? Ehrenfest must be suffering in her absence."

"Of course we are worried," Wilfried replied. "But Ehrenfest has been preparing to function without her for over half a year now; her absence is not troubling us as much as you might imagine."

By cutting through the euphemisms, one could easily deduce what the boy was trying to say: as far as Ehrenfest was concerned, this "Gramps" person's decision to steal away Rozemyne was no less troublesome than the Sovereignty's attempts to do the same. My first thought was to interpret this as a sharp critique of the royal family... but knowing Ehrenfest, perhaps he had meant something else entirely.

Conversing with Ehrenfest is anything but straightforward...

"Though her long absence is a cause for concern," Hartmut said, "our knowledge that she is well keeps us from fretting too much."

His peers all wore rigid smiles, but not a single one of them spoke out in protest. It was terribly strange. The royal family was genuinely considering the possibility that she might have died.

"How can you say that so confidently?" I asked.

"I am able to feel my lady's mana," he replied with a smile. "And if she *had* climbed to the towering heights, I would already have gone with her."

Out of the blue, I remembered one of the terms of Rozemyne's adoption: her name-sworn would go with her, whether they were underage or not. And judging by what Hartmut had just said...

He gave her his name, then?

Under normal circumstances, one would never disclose such information—but Hartmut had casually announced that he was under the influence of Rozemyne's mana and was even gazing appreciatively at the feystone ornament hanging from his neck. It was adorned with Rozemyne's personal crest, which was present on the last page of every Ehrenfest book.

Hartmut continued: "I do not know Lady Rozemyne's location, but I can feel her mana growing stronger by the day—and at a shocking rate, might I add. It is because we know she is in good health that we can carry on with our lives."

Will this Hartmut be accompanying her to the Sovereignty? He revels so openly in the bliss of her mana... The number of known eccentrics in Ehrenfest only increases by the day.

Everything else aside, Ehrenfest was sticking to its story that Rozemyne had taken ill. They were telling anyone who asked that she had been sent back home out of concern for her health.

"If possible, we would ask the professors to hurry Rozemyne through her remaining lessons when she returns," Wilfried ventured. "Any excuse will do. We would also be grateful if you could let her stay in the Royal Academy beyond the winter months."

I nodded. That would always have been necessary now that she was joining the royal family.

"Wilfried, there is something I must ask you," I said. "The upcoming adoption will result in the cancellation of your engagement to Rozemyne. How do you feel about that?"

"I consider it an inevitable development. And to be frank, I was ill-suited to be Rozemyne's fiancé in the first place. You are a better match for her than I, Prince Sigiswald."

He did not seem at all perturbed that his engagement was being canceled. One could assume he was wrestling with more conflicted emotions on the inside, but it was an excellent display of self-control.

"Incidentally..." he continued, "if you would permit me to make a suggestion,

I would advise that you start crafting charms as soon as possible. Rozemyne wears so many for protection that, if you do not start soon, you will most likely struggle to replace them before the engagement.”

That brought to mind two incidents when Rozemyne’s charms had unwittingly been activated, once by Rauffen and another time by an Immerdink student. Considering that she would soon have the Grutrissheit in her possession, more charms would absolutely be necessary to protect her.

I thanked Wilfried with a cup of tea.

In the end, Rozemyne did not return in time for the Interduchy Tournament or the graduation ceremony. Ortwin was made first-in-class in her absence, which naturally caused a stir among the duchies.

Even now, Ehrenfest held to their story that Rozemyne had merely fallen ill. Fraularm had continuously screeched that they were lying and that Rozemyne had in truth ascended to the distant heights, so she had ultimately been plucked from the Interduchy Tournament, relieved of her teaching role, and sent back to Ahrensbach. Thus was the unanimous decision made by a committee of professors at the Royal Academy.

On a whim, I ended up visiting the library the day after the graduation ceremony. I found myself concerned about whether the magic tools Rozemyne had tended to remained well. If no one supplied them with mana over the winter and Solange had to rely on feystones from the Dedication Ritual, they would surely run out during the spring.

“I thank you ever so much for your concern, Prince Sigiswald,” Solange said once I was done. She also informed me that Hildebrand and Hannelore had been working hard as Library Committee members and that Wilfried and Charlotte had delivered some mana-filled feystones since my last visit. Her reassurances calmed the nagging voice in my head.

Satisfied that the library was in safe hands, I decided to return to my villa. But as I stepped out of the librarians’ office and passed the door to the reading room, I paused. It was here that Rozemyne had disappeared.

To avoid arousing any suspicion, I'd decided not to inspect the second floor on the day Rozemyne had vanished; more students had been visiting the library at the time, and the appearance of a prince would doubtless have caused a stir. But with the graduation ceremony now over, there wouldn't be anyone around today. I entered the reading room and climbed the stairs on the left.

Ehrenfest capes?

To my surprise, I wasn't alone; three individuals wearing dark-yellow capes were at the back of the reading room. Perhaps the magic tool that Rozemyne had supplied with mana was also nearby.

"Prince Sigiswald...?" one of the three said. It was Ferdinand, the man for whom Rozemyne had cast aside all conventions. He must have been here because he knew she was missing, not ill.

"Worried about Rozemyne, I presume? It certainly has been a long time."

"Truly... Might I ask what brings you here?"

"The same as you, I would imagine—I came to inspect the magic tool Rozemyne was supplying at the time. I could not come before when there were so many students around."

In truth, it was convenient that Ferdinand was here; I was aware that Rozemyne had disappeared while supplying mana to one of the magic tools on the library's second floor, but that was all. I decided to start by asking which tools could even be found here.

In response, Ferdinand detailed every single one. Including those big and small, there were more than ten in total. I did not know which one Rozemyne had been supplying at the time of her disappearance, and as Ferdinand now lived in another duchy, it seemed safe to assume that he was equally unsure.

I gave Ferdinand my thanks, then turned to leave. I only made it a few steps before an exhausted murmur stopped me in my tracks.

"Rozemyne, you always find a way to ruin my plans..."

Ferdinand spoke in a low voice, but his words rang out clearly—perhaps due to the emptiness of the room. When I turned around, I saw him glaring at a

statue of Mestionora with a book in her arms.

Once the students had all returned to their duchies, knights were put in place for the purposes of communication and dormitories were shut. Ehrenfest alone sent a request to keep their dormitory open; they wanted two attendants—Lieseleta and Gretia—two knights, and a chef to stay at the Royal Academy so that they could tend to Rozemyne when she returned.

And a few days later, it happened. I received an ordonnanz from my father just as I was finishing dinner.

“Sigiswald: Hildebrand received a message from Ehrenfest. They want us to open the Farthest Hall. Hildebrand insists on going, so I must ask that you accompany him.”

No sooner had the bird concluded than I rose from my seat, recalling Magdalena’s concerns about her son’s attachment to Rozemyne. I responded to my father, then sent messages to Hildebrand and Ehrenfest, telling them to meet me at the auditorium.

Upon my arrival, an attendant carrying what appeared to be some cloth approached me. “I am Lieseleta, Lady Rozemyne’s head attendant,” she announced. “My sincerest apologies for troubling the royal family at this late hour, but my lady has appeared in the Farthest Hall. If we had sent a standard petition, she might have been stuck in there for days...”

The moon hung resplendently in the sky, fighting back some of the darkness, but it was still much too late to call on the royal family. Lieseleta had decided to anyway—and in truth, she had made the right call.

“Our convenience is trivial in the face of such news,” I said. “Let us hurry.”

“Sigiswald, may we open the door now?”

“Be calm, Hildebrand,” I replied. He was making his excitement much too obvious.

At my order, the door to the auditorium was unlocked. We hurried through it, shrouded in darkness, hearing only the sound of our footsteps, until we reached

a feystone at the back of the room. I touched it, opening a second door, and then passed through an iridescent film into the Farthest Hall.

“Rozemyne...?” I said, inhaling sharply.

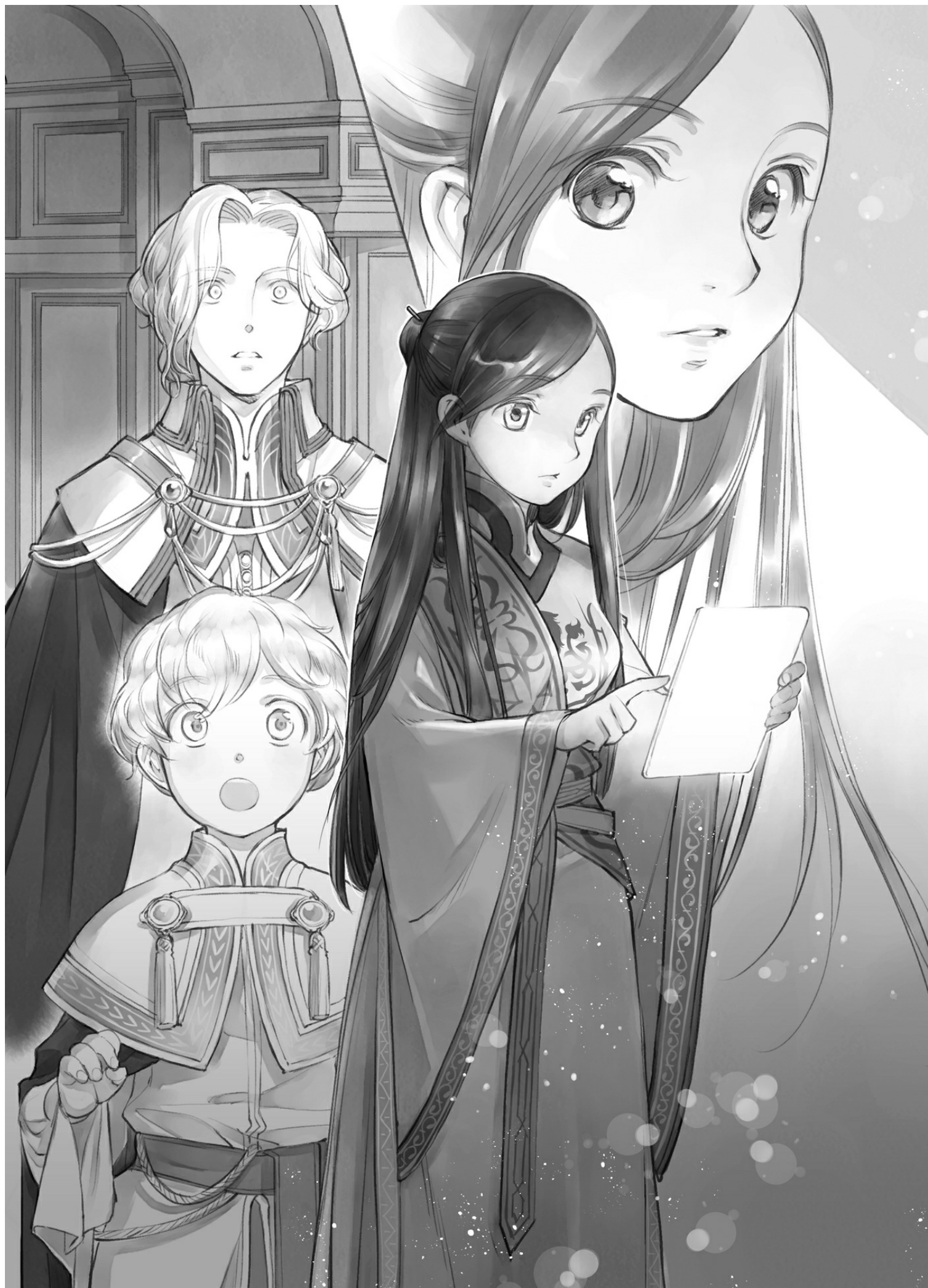
Amid the moonlight streaming in through the room’s narrow windows, I could see a figure resembling Rozemyne holding a glowing tablet. She looked almost magical, to the point that I struggled to perceive her as a being of our world.

Her hair as dark as the night sky was wrapped around an unforgettable hair ornament bearing rainbow feystones. She turned to peer at us with eyes as golden as I remembered, and it was then that I noticed she was wearing the same High Bishop robes as when she had disappeared. In many ways, she hadn’t changed at all—yet at the same time, she was almost unrecognizable. Before, she had looked young enough to be a new student at the Royal Academy, but that disparity between her appearance and age was nowhere to be seen.

Rozemyne’s round, somewhat babyish face was now slim and more refined. Even her fingers were long and slender. Her body looked soft and overtly feminine—and as she had yet to come of age, she had the transient beauty of a girl approaching adulthood.

It’s the blessing of the gods...

That was the only thought I could muster. Nothing else could describe what I was seeing. Rozemyne had always been pretty, but it had never crossed my mind that she might grow into someone so beautiful.



As I swallowed, completely transfixed, Rozemyne's retainers rushed forward from behind me.

"Lady Rozemyne!"

"I see you brought what I requested. Thank you ever so much, Lieseleta."

"I am glad to see you safe. We were truly worried."

Lieseleta put the cloak she was holding over Rozemyne, hiding her lady almost entirely. I was about to protest, since I wanted a better look, but I quickly suppressed the urge.

"Rozemyne, why are you...?" Hildebrand asked, his voice breaking in surprise. It was no wonder he was so taken aback; Rozemyne had previously been his height, but now she was more than a head taller.

"I visited the Garden of Beginnings, where His Divinity Erwaermen asked Anwachs the God of Growth to make me larger."

Then, before Hildebrand could question her any further, Rozemyne unmade the glowing tablet in her hands and approached me. She had stood only as tall as my chest the last time we'd met, but now she reached as high as my chin. She was on the shorter side for an adult woman, but considering her age, it was likely she would grow a touch more.

"Prince Sigiswald," she said, her previously high-pitched voice now gentle and mature. Though she had the same look in her golden eyes, now that she was taller, I couldn't help feeling that we were closer than ever.

"Yes?" I asked.

"I do not wish to inconvenience you, but can we discuss the details of my absence during the Archduke Conference? I must return to Ehrenfest at once to speak with the aub." She was making no attempt to hide her urgency, and it seemed that she was looking straight through me.

The Royal Academy without My Sister

“Lady Charlotte, Lord Wilfried, could we have a moment of your time?”

It was lunchtime on the Earthday of the archnobles’ Dedication Ritual, and we had received a visit from Rozemyne’s retainers. As archduke candidates, Wilfried and I only needed to participate in the ceremonies, but Rozemyne was the High Bishop; she had to deliver the collected mana to the royal family and observe the cleanup process, among other things, so she hadn’t returned to the dormitory with us.

I cocked my head in response to the question. “Hmm? I do not see Rozemyne with you. Is she taking some rest?” It was unusual for her retainers to be here without their lady.

Hartmut threw his hands up in the air, a drunken smile plastered across his face. “That is what we shall tell the public, but in truth, Lady Rozemyne has been invited to the realm of the gods by Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom. Aah, what a beautiful miracle! Praise be to the gods!”

I wasn’t the only one dazed by his bizarre words and sudden prayer; every single student and server in the dining hall wore a look of complete bewilderment.

Paying no mind to Hartmut’s fervent prayers, I turned instead to my sister’s other retainers. They had their heads in their hands, similarly troubled that he was being so strange, but Damuel at least managed an explanation.

“After the Dedication Ritual, Lady Rozemyne was permitted to share some of the collected mana with the library. She went straight there with Prince Sigiswald, whereupon the magic tools asked her to supply one area in particular.”

“The magic tools”? He must mean Schwartz and Weiss. Every student in Ehrenfest knows that Rozemyne supplies mana as a member of the Library Committee.

“Lady Rozemyne started doing as the tools had instructed... then abruptly disappeared.”

Even though Damuel was only a laynoble, everyone was paying a lot more attention to him than to Hartmut. I appreciated that he had given such a clear answer, but I was still at a loss.

“Um, what do you mean she disappeared...?” I asked.

“There is nothing more I can say. She was in front of us, then a moment later, she was gone. We do not know the details, but according to the library’s magic tools, she ‘went to see Gramps.’”

“‘Gramps’?” Wilfried repeated, a dubious look on his face. “Who in the world is Gramps?”

Cornelius shook his head. “The most they said was that he’s old and powerful. Not even Professor Solange or Prince Sigiswald could tell us anything.”

“Is she safe?”

“We believe so, as her name-sworn retainers are still with us. The most we can do is await her return.”

I cast my eyes over Rozemyne’s name-sworn retainers, formerly of the Veronica faction. If my sister died, they would too. One could only imagine the anxiety that would rack them until she came back to us.

“We have already discussed the matter with Prince Sigiswald,” Leonore said, looking around the dining hall. “By his order, until our lady returns, we shall act as if she has taken ill.”

“Hold on. Let me get this straight,” Wilfried interjected. “Something beyond explanation has happened to Rozemyne. She’s alive, but we don’t know when she’ll return. There’s absolutely nothing we can do, so by the order of a prince, we’re to act as if she’s ill. Everyone on the same page?”

The gathered students nodded, if somewhat uneasily.

“Well, we don’t have much of a choice in the matter,” he sighed. “None of the other duchies would believe us if we said she randomly disappeared or that she was invited somewhere by the Goddess of Wisdom.”

“Indeed,” Lieseleta said. “And even if we revealed that information with good intentions, we would receive a harsh scolding from both Aub Ehrenfest and the royal family. We would also inadvertently unleash Hartmut, who would start corrupting the minds of anyone who dared to listen. He would tarnish our duchy’s reputation. The rest of the country would lump us together with him.”

In complete silence, we all gazed at Hartmut. He looked no less enthralled and was still raving that only someone truly virtuous would receive an invitation from Mestionora. I recalled something that Ernesta, one of my retainers, had told me: Hartmut’s campaign to establish “the Saint of Ehrenfest” during my sister’s two-year slumber had earned us a lot of grimaces from the other duchies.

We must not unleash him, no matter the circumstances!

Hartmut had special permission from *the Zent* to be here for this year’s Dedication Rituals, meaning we couldn’t send him back to Ehrenfest until they had all been completed in full.

“Everyone, hold your silence to the last,” Wilfried ordered, his voice tinged with despair. “The fate of our duchy’s honor rests with you.”

Everyone but Hartmut nodded in response.

We reported the incident to Father the same day—and in response, he told us to do as the royal family had instructed. Everyone, even those back in Ehrenfest, would pretend that Rozemyne had simply fallen ill until we were ordered otherwise.

“I can only hope that Rozemyne returns soon...” I murmured.

Her name-sworn retainers were still alive, which meant she was too, but not being able to see her was still deeply concerning.

Three whole days had passed, yet Rozemyne was still nowhere to be seen.

“How is the dormitory?” I asked. “I was told that some of the students were whipped into a frenzy and wanted to investigate the connection between Rozemyne’s disappearance and one of the Royal Academy’s mysteries. Are we

not at risk of them revealing the truth to other duchies?”

There were various mysteries attached to the Royal Academy: the goddess statue that danced on the night of the graduation ceremony, the gazebo where the Goddess of Time played tricks, and the gewinnen pieces that played ditter, to name a few. But there was one in particular that was garnering a lot of attention: the disappearance of a student said to have played pranks at one of the supreme gods’ shrines and incurred their divine wrath. According to a report from my apprentice guard knight Fonsel, some of our own were comparing the tale to Rozemyne’s current situation. There was much that occurred in the boys’ rooms of the Ehrenfest Dormitory that we female students were never made privy to, so I was reliant on the accounts of my male retainers.

“Lord Hartmut caught them, so I don’t believe they will spread any such information,” Fonsel assured me.

Hartmut had apparently caught the students in question and said to them with a threatening smile, “Lady Rozemyne received an invitation from the gods. Do you truly believe she has done something to earn their ire? Be ashamed of yourselves, for you are too blind to see how fortunate we are to have the Saint of Ehrenfest.”

Fonsel continued, “He said that for their sullied minds to be corrected, they would need to learn to pray with perfect form, so he forced them to pray over and over again. He broke their spirits in the process, but not even that earned them forgiveness. They are currently being made to recite all of Lady Rozemyne’s great deeds.”

“As in... they are being forced to memorize them?”

“Yes. Lord Hartmut considers it even more important than their classes. The whole spectacle has deterred the other students from uttering even a word about your sister.”

In short, Hartmut was keeping a close eye on the dormitory and threatening the students into submission by means of praising Rozemyne. Though there were exceptions when students caused trouble, as a girl, I couldn’t go to the second floor—just as boys couldn’t go to the third.

“Would it be best for me to intervene as an archduke candidate?” I asked. “Is my brother aware of the situation, I wonder?”

“He is well aware. The students being reprimanded even went to his retainers and asked that he put a stop to Lord Hartmut.”

“And what was his response?”

“He declined, reminding the students that he had warned them to keep quiet. ‘Those who bad-mouth Rozemyne while Hartmut can hear them have only themselves to blame,’ he said. ‘Accept your fate and do as he tells you.’”

I understood all too well why Wilfried didn’t want to get involved with Hartmut. It seemed best to learn from his example and pretend to be oblivious to the entire situation.

“It certainly is important that the students learn not to speak lightly about Rozemyne’s absence,” I said. “And this punishment from Hartmut won’t impact their futures as a scolding from Father or the royal family would.”

The day after my decision to let Hartmut manage the dormitory, Professor Hirschur arrived out of the blue. She was our dormitory supervisor, so this might not have seemed strange at first, but everyone who knew her understood what a rare occasion it was.

“I was told that Lady Rozemyne has taken ill, so I came to see her,” Professor Hirschur announced. “It isn’t like her to hide away before finishing her classes. She cannot visit the library before she passes her exams, can she?”

I exchanged glances with Rozemyne’s retainers and Wilfried. The sharp look in Professor Hirschur’s purple eyes demanded to know what was happening.

But if the royal family hasn’t explained the situation to her, we should probably keep her in the dark...

As it stood, Rozemyne physically couldn’t take her exams. The professors were sure to consider it strange, but until the royal family contacted them or gave us new orders, it seemed wise to keep things under wraps.

“We shall keep a close eye on her health and send word when things change,”

I said.

“For days I remained patient, but I can wait no longer,” Professor Hirschur shot back. “Though I do not know the details of this ‘situation,’ I must know your plans for your joint research with Ahrensbach. Lady Rozemyne is the one with all the research materials, is she not?” She wore a smile but clearly had no intention of budging on the matter.

Wilfried gave a defeated sigh. “She’s here for the research materials. We won’t be able to fool her no matter how much we try.”

“Brunhilde, Lieseleita—my apologies, but could you take Professor Hirschur to my sister’s room and explain the situation?” I asked.

We had decided to bring our dormitory supervisor into the fold, and entrusting the explanation to Rozemyne’s retainers was only natural. I’d specified my sister’s room to keep Hartmut from getting involved; his constant raving would only slow things down.

The negotiations ended with Professor Hirschur agreeing to cooperate with our subterfuge and assist Rozemyne with her exams and such when she eventually returned. In exchange, she took all the ingredients my sister had brought with her to make the agreed-upon magic tools for her library.

“Though my sister is known for finishing her classes in the blink of an eye,” I said, “it would still be perfectly acceptable for her to wait until the final exams like almost everyone else.”

“Indeed,” my head attendant, Vanessa, replied. “She will surely have returned by then.”

That was what we told ourselves, but the following Earthday came without any new developments. Wilfried was currently overseeing the mednobles’ Dedication Ritual, in which Prince Hildebrand was also participating. I was simply waiting to hear from those of my retainers who were attending the ceremony.

“So? How was it?” I asked when they eventually returned. “Have any of the other duchies realized that Rozemyne is missing?”

According to Wilfried, not even her classmates in the archduke candidate course had noticed, but an entire week had now passed. Professor Hirschur had grown suspicious, and Lady Hannelore of Dunkelfelger had sent a message expressing her concern. It was only a matter of time before people started to ask questions.

Or so I thought. My apprentice attendants Kathrein and Cassandra looked at each other before staring at me quizzically.

“We have no reason to believe that anyone doubts our excuse,” they said. “Prince Hildebrand openly expressed his concern for her health and, in a conversation with Lord Wilfried, told us to give her his well-wishes. None would scrutinize the words of royalty.”

“His well-wishes?” I repeated. “Was that really all? Did he not follow them with orders of some kind?”

“No, my lady. We can assume the royal family wants to maintain the status quo. They are likely working on the professors as we speak.”

Professor Hirschur had noticed that something was amiss, but Cassandra said there were no rumors spreading among the other teachers.

My attendants continued: “Our one potential cause for concern is Lady Gentiane of Klassenberg. She wishes to join the Library Committee and is, according to Lord Wilfried, now awaiting Lady Rozemyne’s recovery. She has also given us some documents related to our joint research.”

“Is my brother going through them now...?” I asked. They would need to be reviewed before the Royal Academy’s Dedication Rituals concluded and socializing with the other duchies began.

“No, my lady. Lord Hartmut took them. Lady Rozemyne was apparently looking forward to seeing them, so... he stole them, claiming that the rest of us could make do with transcribed copies. Lord Ignaz could only slump his shoulders in defeat.”

It would have been better if the documents had gone to either my brother’s or my own retainers, but as we had yet to finish all of our classes, I supposed this arrangement was fine. We wouldn’t have been able to read them just yet,

anyway.

“Will the transcriptions be done before socializing begins and we must discuss the results with Klassenberg?” I asked.

“Lord Hartmut is rallying all of his fellow retainers to have them done before they must return to Ehrenfest.”

“We may relax, then.”

“Lord Wilfried is proactively involved with the joint research, but he has asked that all invitations be redirected to you,” Kathrein said with a sigh, looking a tad concerned. “We will need to start preparing to socialize.”

My brother bombarding me with invitations to girls’ tea parties was something of a regular occurrence now. He likely intended to leave any tea parties with Klassenberg to me while he took the results from our joint research.

“Should we consult Brunhilde?” I asked.

“That would be wise, my lady. I apologize for our inadequacy. As we are but mednobles, we struggled to obtain intelligence from Klassenberg...”

“There is little one can do about status. I ask only that you support Brunhilde however you can.”

The tastes of Lady Gentiane, a first-year, were still unknown outside of her duchy. It was the duty of attendants to meet and exchange such intelligence, but the archduke candidates of greater duchies were normally attended to by archnobles. During first-time meetings, apprentice medattendants wouldn’t receive any attention at all. Kathrein and the others might have been able to get a few words in, but there was a tremendous disparity between what they and Brunhilde were able to learn.

Plus, I chose my retainers on the basis that I would one day leave Ehrenfest...

My archnoble retainers responsible for tutoring the others had since graduated, and the apprentice archnobles in grades below my own still needed to be trained. It must have been because of Grandmother’s tyranny—few archnobles wished to see their children serve the archducal family, so there

weren't many in my brother's year or my own who were willing to become our retainers.

"My apologies, Lady Charlotte. I am no help at all despite being an archnoble..."

"You are only a first-year, Ediline; I do not expect you to have already associated with nobles from top-ranking duchies. I will ask Brunhilde to train you alongside Bertilde, so work hard to establish those bonds this year."

"Yes, my lady."

Ediline was an apprentice archattendant in my service who had entered the Royal Academy at the same time as Bertilde. It was critically important that she socialize with top-ranking apprentice attendants while Brunhilde was still a student.

Once my sister entered the royal family and granted Ehrenfest her protection, Bertilde and Ediline would stand among the vanguard of our dormitory and need to interact with the top-ranking duchies alongside Vanessa.

"Ten whole days have passed," I mused aloud. "Is Rozemyne truly oka—?"

"CHARLOTTE!"

Wilfried sprang up out of his chair to stop me. I clapped a hand over my mouth mere moments later, but it was already too late. My brother glanced at Hartmut, groaned, and then sat back down with a hand on his forehead.

"Fear not!" my sister's greatest advocate proclaimed. "Lady Rozemyne is growing by the day. I am able to feel even the slightest changes in her mana!"

How foolish of me...

Thus began another of Hartmut's long-winded speeches about Rozemyne. We would need a way to divert his attention, so I turned to my sister's other name-sworn retainers.

"How very delightful that my sister is growing. Still, hearing these declarations from Hartmut alone makes me wonder just how credible they are. If name-sworn retainers can feel their lady's mana, should the rest of you not be

experiencing the same thing?”

Hartmut must have realized that I was indirectly telling him to shut up and allow the others a chance to speak; he went quiet to focus on Roderick and Matthias.

“Ah, erm...” Roderick stammered. “I do feel a very slight improvement in my brewing and the like, so I see no reason to doubt that her mana is growing. One thing I am curious about is whether it means her body is growing as well.”

Matthias nodded. “I don’t feel it as keenly as Hartmut does, but I can tell that Lady Rozemyne’s acquiring more mana.”

“I can sense her mana increasing and becoming more stable, so as Hartmut says, her vessel may be growing. I cannot say for sure, though...” Laurenz said.

I nodded. If nothing else, they seemed a lot less certain than Hartmut. Putting the question of her physical growth aside, there was no longer room to doubt that my sister’s already vast mana quantity was increasing further still.

But as I was feeling impressed, I noticed that Hartmut was grimacing in displeasure at his fellow name-sworn. I swiftly attempted to cover for them.

“The main takeaway from this is that nobody can compare to Hartmut when it comes to loyalty and compassion. Hartmut, I must ask that you continue to devote yourself as my sister’s greatest retainer.”

“As you wish, Lady Charlotte,” he replied, a truly satisfied smile arising on his face. The other nearby retainers all sighed in relief—and from among them, Lieseleta stepped forward.

“Lady Charlotte, Lord Wilfried, I wish to deliver a report.”

As it turned out, Lady Hannelore had coordinated with Rozemyne’s attendants to lend us a book. Lieseleta wanted me to write a letter of thanks in my sister’s place and uphold our end of the exchange. Rozemyne had already decided which book she would give.

“If you see Lady Hannelore during class or a tea party anytime soon, do thank her for the book,” Lieseleta concluded.

“Those from Dunkelfelger are quite worried about my sister, aren’t they?” I

replied. “Indeed, I shall thank her during our next tea party together.”

Wilfried gave a firm nod of agreement. “Yeah, Lady Hannelore is the type to be real thoughtful and considerate. She doesn’t get that there’s nothing for her to worry about. Hartmut and the others say that Rozemyne’s fine.”

It’s not about NEEDING to worry! You should worry about her anyway!

A deep sigh escaped me. I doubted that Wilfried even noticed the icy looks Rozemyne’s retainers were now giving him.

The laynobles’ Dedication Ritual ended without incident. Hartmut and the others had carried out the preparations to a T, meaning the rest of us had only needed to do as instructed and chant the prayer. I would need to thank my father, who had asked that the adults be permitted to stay at the Royal Academy and assist us with the ceremonies, and the Zent, who had actually allowed it. If we students had tried to balance everything ourselves, it would have been a truly nightmarish experience.

“Welcome back, Lady Charlotte,” Ediline said upon my return, looking tense. “Lady Brunhilde has arranged a meeting. There is something urgent she wishes to discuss.”

Having decided to prioritize the meeting over changing my clothes, I asked Kathrein and the others to prepare tea while I sent an ordonnanz of acknowledgment to Brunhilde.

“Lady Charlotte, I am delighted that you accepted my invitation,” Brunhilde said when I arrived. “And you came before even taking a moment to change. I am ever so grateful.”

“This is an urgent discussion, correct?” I asked, then held out a sound-blocker. “Will this be necessary?”

She accepted it with a slight smile, then got straight to the point: “Hartmut brought us a letter of invitation from Prince Sigiswald.”

“I doubt this concerns me...” I said. The royal family only ever wished to speak with Rozemyne—or if she was absent, with Wilfried. My brother was the more

likely candidate to receive such an invitation, especially considering that he was older than me, so I wasn't quite sure what Brunhilde wanted.

"It is addressed to both you and Lord Wilfried—and to Lady Rozemyne's retainers."

"On what basis did Prince Sigiswald select these participants...?"

"Hartmut suspects they want to discuss Lady Rozemyne's status under the guise of praising those who performed the religious ceremonies. The meeting is limited to those who wore ceremonial robes, thereby excluding Lady Gentiane of Klassenberg."

Klassenberg was much closer to the royal family than Ehrenfest. They were also considered an equal participant in our joint research. Their lack of an invitation only further reinforced Hartmut's prediction.

"Lady Rozemyne's move to the Sovereignty will most likely be discussed," Brunhilde said. "Thus, I would advise you and Lord Wilfried to exclude your retainers."

"That might be difficult when my sister's retainers are participating..."

"Perhaps you could say that only those who visited the temple with her in Ehrenfest were invited. Besides, this is an excellent opportunity for Lady Rozemyne's name-sworn and me to introduce ourselves formally to Prince Sigiswald. They will soon be moving to the Sovereignty, whereas I am due to become a member of our duchy's archducal family."

In short, we really couldn't bring any retainers other than Rozemyne's.

"Very well," I said. "I shall convince my retainers."

"Moreover, we will need to align ourselves with Aub Ehrenfest. I would ask you to reach a conclusion with Lord Wilfried and then report back to me." Brunhilde had apparently tried to discuss the matter with my brother's retainers, only for them to sneer at her attempts to act like a member of the archducal family before her Starbinding. There was no more headway she could make with them alone.

"My brother remains critical of your engagement to our father and shows no

signs that his own engagement is about to be canceled, so his retainers do not realize how vulnerable they are right now..." I mused. "How troublesome. Even now, Wilfried is unable to control his retinue."

"It is a retainer's duty to do as their lord or lady instructs. Thus, when the cancellation is announced, I would advise Lord Wilfried to think carefully about the futures of those who serve him."

As far as Brunhilde was concerned, my brother wasn't putting much thought into the future. That was somewhat understandable, as he was being asked to maintain the status quo and didn't have any handovers to rush through, but not even I could grasp his intentions.

What does Wilfried intend to do after the cancellation is announced...?

Our meeting with the royal family was underway. I'd assumed that my discussion with Wilfried had put us on the same page and that I could merely sit back as a tagalong...

But I was mistaken.

"Of course we are worried. But Ehrenfest has been preparing to function without her for over half a year now; her absence is not troubling us as much as you might imagine."

Wilfried, was that not rude?! One might think you were sharply critiquing the royal family's decision to adopt Rozemyne!

My brother had surely meant to say that Ehrenfest was almost ready for Rozemyne's departure and that the royal family had nothing to worry about, but was that how our host had interpreted it? Prince Sigiswald was looking notably quizzical.

I neglected to prepare enough Wilfried countermeasures!

As my stomach began to ache, I exchanged a look with Brunhilde. She didn't seem at all taken aback; instead, she gestured to Hartmut, as if she had expected this to happen all along. My sister's retainers weren't to be doubted. I watched on with hope... only for Hartmut to launch into a long-winded speech.

No! Save that for the dormitory!

I wanted to cry out in anguish—but to my surprise, Hartmut’s lecture actually worked. Prince Sigiswald was frowning at the crested feystone now being held aloft, likely having forgotten all about Wilfried. On the surface, it seemed as though Hartmut was simply babbling on, but he was actually redirecting the conversation to the rumors about Rozemyne and what we would need to do when she returned. How was he capable of such an impressive feat? It made no sense.

“We will return to Ehrenfest after this meeting and claim that we are taking the ill Lady Rozemyne with us,” Hartmut said. We had promised to report as much to Father.

Once the discussion had settled down a little, Prince Sigiswald asked my brother what he thought about his engagement being canceled.

“I consider it an inevitable development. And to be frank, I was ill-suited to be Rozemyne’s fiancé in the first place. You are a better match for her than I, Prince Sigiswald.”

I gasped. He had started strong... but that second part was so terribly rude!

And then you advised the prince to replace Rozemyne’s charms before their engagement?! Wilfried, what are you saying?!

I shot a nervous glance at Prince Sigiswald, but his face betrayed no emotion. That made the situation even more terrifying...

But then the prince gave Wilfried a cup of tea.

Wait... Prince Sigiswald was responsible for my brother losing his position as the next aub, right? Was he on guard all this time, fearing that there might be tension between them?

If so, his provision of tea implied that those concerns were now gone.

A relieved sigh escaped me. If nothing else, I could rest assured that my brother hadn’t caused offense.

“We appreciate your aid. I pray that Ehrenfest’s Dedication Ritual goes just as

well.”

Hartmut and the others were returning home, so the rest of us had gathered to say farewell. Our excuse henceforth was going to be that Rozemyne had returned to Ehrenfest for its Dedication Ritual. It wouldn't be hard to sell, so the air in the dormitory relaxed almost immediately.

“At last, everything's back to normal,” Wilfried remarked. “Rozemyne's disappearance was a big surprise, but at least we'll get some peace for once.”

“Wilfried, what are you saying?!” I exclaimed.

“Am I wrong? We have barely anything to write about in our reports this year.”

Hartmut and the others might be gone, but think about Rozemyne's student retainers!

They could neither complain nor protest, since Wilfried was a member of the archducal family, but their impression of him only ever seemed to get worse. Why did my brother always make such unnecessary remarks, displeasing those around him in the process?

“I, for one, am troubled by our sister's absence. All those who reach out to Ehrenfest do so only to connect with her.”

“Hasn't that always been the case? We'll make it through the rest of the year just fine.”

That isn't what I'm worried about!

Rozemyne's move to the Sovereignty would completely change how other duchies viewed and socialized with Ehrenfest. In an ideal world, we would spend this year attending social events with her, showing the rest of the country how well we got along and securing ourselves better treatment moving forward. It wasn't something we could do without her.

I wished that I could speak my mind—that I could tell my brother exactly what was bothering me—but I'd already been sworn to silence. The most I could do was sigh.

Please return soon, Rozemyne. Please.

It was time for everyone to socialize.

As was now the norm, Ehrenfest's interactions with other duchies had mostly been entrusted to my brother and me. It wasn't an ideal situation, but at least Brunhilde was around to help us. She was currently Rozemyne's retainer *and* a future member of our archducal family, which allowed us to broach more topics than ever before. It was heartening to have her support.

"Lady Gentiane of Klassenberg has said that Rozemyne promised to accept her into the Library Committee," I announced. "How should we react? She seems to have orders from her aub and wishes to meet with our sister even while she is unwell."

Lady Gentiane had asked us to arrange a meeting as soon as Rozemyne's health showed even the slightest improvement. It was a troubling development, and as I wasn't a member of the Library Committee, I didn't even know what the induction process entailed. Was the promise even real to begin with?

"As I recall, Lady Rozemyne received the request through Lady Eglantine," Brunhilde replied. "I would suggest we refuse it via the same channel. Or perhaps we could leave the matter to Prince Hildebrand, who is also a member of the Library Committee."

Brunhilde's idea to have the royal family deal with the requests they'd thrust upon us sounded exactly like something Rozemyne would come up with. Perhaps they were more similar than I'd expected, though I kept that thought to myself.

Lady Gentiane's request aside, nobody seemed too concerned about Rozemyne's health. A few people had sent their well-wishes, as expected, but that was about it. On the one hand, I was relieved that the truth hadn't leaked to other duchies; but on the other, I was a little upset.

"Now is not the time to be sentimental," Brunhilde said, having read me like a book. "We can expect to be questioned even more aggressively during the Interduchy Tournament. We would do well to get the aub and the royal family on the same page before then."

“Father will tell them she is unwell, as he has told everyone. But on that note... what manner of hairpin did you receive from him, Brunhilde? You proposed that a matching one be given to my mother, did you not?”

Because my sister’s engagement to Wilfried was being canceled, the Leisegangs’ hopes now rested entirely on Brunhilde’s children. Brunhilde was about to take on a role she would find even harder to navigate.

“I shan’t break the promise I made to prop up Lady Florencia,” she said. “Thus, you will need to find a worthy husband of your own, Lady Charlotte.”

“But would any man agree to marry a mere interim aub...? Someone of a higher-ranking duchy might even insist that they deserve to rule instead.”

“Given the current trend of archducal families adopting new members, perhaps you could set your sights on those younger than you.”

In the event that Brunhilde became pregnant, I would need to become the aub before the baby’s baptism, wear down the Leisegangs’ power, and then wait for Melchior to grow enough to take over from me. To further smooth the handover process, I would want my husband to be someone of a similar rank, while Melchior would want to marry someone from a top-ranking duchy.

Socializing season concluded, and the Interduchy Tournament began. We received a flood of questions from the other duchies, as anticipated, but there was nothing we could do except repeat that Rozemyne had taken ill.

Uncle seemed very suspicious of us, though... He’s even started trying to gather intelligence on his own.

We hadn’t even told the truth of the matter to my uncle or his retainers—those of Ahrensbach were keeping too close an eye on us, as were the royal family and the Sovereign Knight’s Order. The most we could do was ask Lieseleta to deliver the packages Rozemyne had prepared before her disappearance. The absence of any food or letters would hopefully alert them to the highly unusual circumstances.

Oh, but how comforting it would be if we could speak with Uncle about this...

Perhaps because he was always cleaning up Rozemyne’s messes, I thought he

might be able to work out why she had disappeared.

Father ended up escorting Brunhilde during her graduation, indicating to everyone that she was to be his second wife. In truth, it was strange to see a woman other than Mother at his side. No man was more devoted to a single woman, and yet...

“Wilfried, I can see a crack in your smile,” Mother warned with a calm expression.

My brother had made no attempt to hide his displeasure back at the dormitory. He was only trying to maintain a proper noble facade now because Mother had summoned him and his retainers to a meeting room and given them a harsh scolding.

As I watched their exchange, Mother turned to me. “Did you see the color Brunhilde chose for her hairpin? I said she should go with something that suits her, but instead, she decided to use the color of my hair and our duchy. To think she would make such a statement, and with the hair ornament she was given by her fiancé for her graduation ceremony...”

I gazed upon Brunhilde’s bright crimson hair. As my mother had said, there was another hairpin adorning it—a clear show of resolve.

“Her decision makes sense,” I replied. “Brunhilde does not seek Father’s love; she cares far more about avoiding friction with you and keeping the Leisegang nobles under control. On a related note, your hairpin suits you wonderfully. Those crimson mitfairs make you look even more vibrant.”

Mitfairs were flowers symbolic of cooperation. They were a very appropriate choice, especially as Brunhilde and my mother were showing their support for one another through the colors they had chosen to wear.

Mother laughed and gave me a light pat on the head. “Next time, we will order a hair ornament for you as well, Charlotte.”

Once the graduation ceremony was over, it was time to go back to Ehrenfest. Rozemyne had yet to return, but we had secured permission to keep our dormitory open for when she eventually did. We ended up leaving two

attendants, two guards, one chef, and two servants behind...

And it wasn't until the day after the feast celebrating spring that we received a message from them. I was eating breakfast in my chambers when an ordonnanz arrived to inform me that Rozemyne had returned to the Royal Academy last night.

"And she'll soon be returning to Ehrenfest?!"

As soon as I'd eaten, I discussed this change of plans with my retainers and started getting ready to meet my sister. I rushed out of my room and went downstairs to find that Wilfried and Melchior were waiting for me; then the three of us headed to the teleportation hall. Mother, Father, and Lord Bonifatius were already there when we arrived, as were Rozemyne's retainers, who were hearteningly anxious.

The teleportation circle filled with mana. It started shining black and gold; then the shimmering lights faded to reveal three figures.

I'd intended to give Rozemyne a normal welcome, but when she finally became visible, I was too shocked to say anything at all. She was shockingly—no, *breathtakingly* beautiful. Hartmut had repeated to an obnoxious degree that she was growing... but I'd never expected to see her mature so suddenly.

Rozemyne's dazzling hair, long and as dark as night, swayed majestically as she looked around the room with uncertain eyes. She was now taller than me and seemed so much like an adult that I doubted anyone would use the word "adorable" to describe her ever again. A sigh escaped me; I was struck with the urge to admire her refined, almost sculpturesque beauty from every angle, from now until the end of time.

"Sylvester, it is good to see you again. I am sorry to have worried you. Forgive me for being so blunt, but may I have a moment of your time? There is something extremely important we must discuss."

Rozemyne greeted our father, then immediately requested a meeting. She looked exhausted, but she still agreed to go straight to the archduke's office. There was something strange about her now, like she existed on a higher plane of existence. It forced me to remember the overwhelming gap I'd noticed between us during my baptism ceremony.

What should I do? It feels like Rozemyne suddenly left my world and entered another...

Feeling daunted, I merely watched as she spoke with Lord Bonifatius. Wilfried, on the other hand, strode over and gave her a beaming smile as if nothing had changed.

“Hartmut wouldn’t shut up about how much you’d grown,” he said. “Looks like he was telling the truth. That’s a shocker.”

“Eheheh... I’m a beauty now, wouldn’t you agree? Not even I could believe it when I first looked in the mirror.”

“Yep. You really are. But you didn’t grow on the inside, did you? Somehow, the gap between your looks and your personality is even worse now.”

Seeing their casual conversation brought me back to my senses. Rozemyne’s appearance had changed and she was taller than me now, but she was still my sister. I took a deep breath, both impressed and grateful that my brother had acted without the slightest hesitation, and then finally spoke.

“Welcome back, Sister.”

Their Hopes and Dreams

“You can lock Lady Letizia in here, then move her onto one of the ships when they arrive. The same goes for the woman with her. Oh, right—you don’t yet have the authority to enter the northern and western buildings. Use this to pass through the barriers. I shall entrust you with contacting our allies. Lord Leonzio, let us go to our estate.”

Having finished instructing her guard knights, Lady Detlinde approached me with a pleased smile. Lady Letizia, who was trembling violently and so overcome with despair that she could no longer speak, was to be locked with her apprentice attendant inside the room where Roswitha had been imprisoned.

Our next course of action was clear: we would raid the chambers of Lady Letizia and Lord Ferdinand—in the northern and western buildings, respectively—take whatever feystones and magic tools we found within, and then return our loot to Lanzenave. Of course, we would put Lady Letizia on the same ship.

My heart goes out to her, it really does, but what else could we have done?

As a mana-rich woman in Lanzenave, Lady Letizia would be doted on by more men than she could count. In many ways, I suspected she would have a much happier life than here in Ahrensbach, where she was forced to live under Lady Detlinde, a woman who utterly despised her.

I glanced at the door, then escorted Lady Detlinde to the castle’s front gate.

“Oh yes,” she said, “I will need to inform Mother of our plan’s success. She must be on the edge of her seat awaiting news of my victory.”

Several days ago, Lady Georgine had gone by carriage to wait in a province bordering Ehrenfest. Her location was apparently as close to the border barrier as she could get before magic tools in the shape of white birds would stop being able to reach her. “Ordonnanzas,” they were called. She was there now, waiting for one such bird to inform her of the plan’s outcome.

I’ve not been told what she intends to do next, but it doubtless involves taking

Ehrenfest as her own.

In all things, Lady Georgine cared only about taking Ehrenfest. Her phrasing and demeanor had made it clear to me that she saw Lanzenave, Ahrensbach, the Sovereignty, and even her own daughter as no more than tools to help her realize that singular purpose.

Lady Detlinde had received instruction to contact Lady Georgine once Lord Ferdinand was a feystone, yet she had returned from the Mana Replenishment hall empty-handed. She had even outright said that the poison hadn't worked. To remedy the situation, she had put schtappe-sealing bracelets on his arms before leaving him on a replenishment circle, which would slowly drain all the mana from his body—but she still hadn't confirmed that he was dead.

"Is it truly wise to send your report before obtaining Lord Ferdinand's feystone?" I asked.

Lady Detlinde had an innocent grin spread across her face. She sincerely believed that her mother would rejoice over her success, but I couldn't see Lady Georgine doing that at all. She was a calculating woman who dryly moved whatever pieces were available to her. If one plan failed, she would advance another to compensate or start entirely from scratch. A vague report stating that Lord Ferdinand would die "soon enough" was sure to earn her ire—but at the same time, hiding the error such that it could not be corrected was more likely to result in a fatal misstep that would unravel everything.

"Oh my. Would you have me wait in the Mana Replenishment hall until his mana drains completely? Perish the thought. Not even that vicious poison turned him into a feystone, and they say that nothing is more dangerous than a wounded beast."

Was it not precisely because he is so dangerous that Lady Georgine told you to confirm his death and give his feystone to Lanzenave?

Lady Detlinde had actively kept me apart from Lord Ferdinand, so I'd interacted with him only during our initial greetings. For that same reason, most of my information about him was from other people. Lady Detlinde had told me he was a cold and profoundly jealous man who objected to everything she said and did, whereas Lady Georgine saw him as the greatest threat to her plans—a

dangerous opponent who consistently came first-in-class during his time at the Royal Academy.

He's also deeply hated by the Sovereign knight commander.

Once again, I didn't have the full picture, but it seemed that Lord Ferdinand was a feystone who had somehow slipped out of the Adalgisa villa. I recalled the Sovereign knight commander's insistence that he be "returned to his proper form and sent to Lanzenave as intended."

But personally... I do not resent Lord Ferdinand.

A decade had passed since Yurgenschmidt's civil war, when the Adalgisa villa had been closed and the trade of feystones between our countries had ceased. We now had Lady Detlinde assisting us, and our hunt tonight would secure us higher-quality feystones than ever before, but one could still never have too many.

In truth, I'd been eager to see how great a feystone we would obtain from a seed of Adalgisa ordered to marry into a greater duchy. Now that he was being completely drained of mana, however, his feystone would invariably be empty. It was a terrible waste.

"No, I would not have you wait at all," I replied. "If you simply dealt him the finishing blow, then you would obtain both his feystone and confirmation of his death."

Lady Detlinde grimaced, then shot me a stern glare. "Dear me. You should never ask a lady to do something so boorish!" It was evidently unthinkable for a woman of the archducal family to lay her hands on an enemy. Lady Georgine was said to have done precisely that when dispatching her husband to advance her plans, but the woman in front of me had no such resolve.

"At the very least, should you not make it clear in your report that Lord Ferdinand is still alive?" I asked. I really was running out of options.

"That would result in Mother scolding me, would it not? Besides, nobody will get in or out of the Mana Replenishment hall. I removed the registration feystones, see?" She held them up. "As long as these are with me, that door will remain firmly shut. Lord Ferdinand will die with time."

In other words, even if Lord Ferdinand somehow managed to escape the magic circle, he would not be able to leave the hall.

So he'll run out of mana or starve, hm?

I didn't want to displease Lady Detlinde. Plus, this was a plan devised by Lady Georgine, of all people; I could guess she had accounted for her daughter's shortcomings. Perhaps she had given someone else the secret duty of double-checking the outcome and providing a more accurate report.

In any case, I decided not to push the matter any further. It wasn't like I could contact Lady Georgine—Lanzenave's communication methods didn't work here, and my lack of a schtappe meant I couldn't send ordonnances—so the most I could do was smile and escort my companion to her carriage, lavishing her with praise along the way.

"I was simply bemoaning my own inability to enter the hall," I said. "Were that restriction not in place, those beautiful hands of yours would not need to be sullied at all. It was not my intention at all to offend you."

"Oh, very well. I shall forgive you. May we meet again soon."

I just need to hold out for a little while longer. Then I can end this farce.

After watching the carriage depart, I climbed into my own. Lady Detlinde refused to ride with me unless there was a third party with us, such as Lady Georgine or Lady Letizia. She was all over me in public, but she was unmarried, so she was presumably trying hard to keep a respectable amount of distance between us. It was pointless, though; despite her best efforts, everyone looked at her with scorn and derision. I assumed that either her standards were twisted or she was operating under some kind of profound misunderstanding.

Exhausting.

Once inside my carriage, I couldn't help heaving a sigh. My cousin Giordano, who usually stood behind me with the countenance of a servant, grinned and plopped down next to me. The flat expression he wore to appease this country's nobles was nowhere to be seen.

"Everything's going as we hoped, Leonzio. Looks like we might actually make it through this."

“Seems to me like things are just getting started. Who’s to say they’ll keep going well?”

“Not me,” Giordano replied, merely shrugging at my attempt to chastise him. “But we’ve got the feystone hunt tonight and those girls ready to be transported, right? That should keep us going for now, even if opening the villa again will take us a while longer.”

Tonight, our envoys in Ahrensbach would go wild; we had received permission from Lady Detlinde and Lady Georgine to kill any and all nobles siding with Lady Letizia. The former was annoyed at those who had chosen not to support her as the next aub, whereas the latter wanted to eliminate anyone who might get in her way down the line. As for us, we needed as many high-quality feystones as we could get. All of our intentions just happened to align.

“Man, Yurgenschmidt nobles sure are terrifying. They don’t show their enemies any mercy whatsoever. Still, this should finally restore power to the royal family. And if all goes well, House Koralie will enjoy a stronger and more secure position.”

There were three main houses in Lanzenave: Koralie, Schentis, and Loeweleier. They shared their names with Yurgenschmidt flowers and the three rooms found in the villa where Lanzenave’s princesses were sent.

I didn’t know too much about the villa—only what the king had told me. To cover the basics, there was meant to be one princess inside each of the three rooms at all times. They would attempt to bring forth sons, one of whom would receive a schtappe upon coming of age and then be sent back to Lanzenave as its next king.

Lanzenave princesses were taken only once every few generations to stop their Yurgenschmidt blood from becoming too thick. Their daughters would stay at the villa in the interim.

After receiving an education in Yurgenschmidt, the next king would return home to be adopted by whomever he was to replace. The boy would naturally know very little about Lanzenave, having spent his entire life elsewhere, so a number of relatives—normally from his mother’s side—would support him and teach him how to manage the country.

During his rule, King Chiaffredo, my grandfather and the son of a Koralie princess, had agreed to marry his daughter to his successor, King Gervasio. The union had never amounted to much, however. It was unknown whether there had been a disagreement of some kind between the couple or whether King Gervasio simply hadn't taken to his new wife, but although he treated her with respect, he had never come to love her. Thus, when he had eventually come to power, his own House Loeweleier and the family of his preferred wife in House Schentis had secured the most influence. Meanwhile, House Koralie had been pushed further and further away.

Lanzenave was making steady technological advancements to compensate for its lack of feystones, and the world at large was turning to power sources other than mana. A king wielding a schtappe was still necessary to maintain the capital, but in this day and age, the common opinion was that a royal family who could provide nothing but mana wasn't necessary at all.

For me to stay in the castle as a royal, we needed a Koralie princess in the Adalgisa villa so that I could take a supportive role under the next king. And to have a princess in the villa, we needed to convince the Zent to reopen it. Lanzenave had protested its closure immediately after the civil war, but to no avail. We had since concluded that our only option was to establish connections with someone who could influence Yurgenschmidt's throne, so we had started waiting for a change in power.

Then, about two years ago, an envoy had returned with a letter from Lady Georgine. The late Aub Ahrensbach had been very much alive at the time.

"Is the king of Lanzenave on familiar terms with the Sovereign knight commander, by chance?"

As far as correspondence went, it had seemed exceptionally bare. She had not even included the name of the Sovereign knight commander, despite him being central to her question.

"The Sovereign knight commander has a solemn duty to protect the Zent," King Gervasio had said. "I recall that he attended the throne but rarely ever visited the villa. Not once did we greet one another, so I cannot say we were at all associated. The question is, does she mean the same knight commander I

remember? It would not be at all unusual for the position to have changed hands.”

Still, even if no such association existed, this was a valuable opportunity for us to form a connection with the Zent. We could not let it slip through our fingers.

In no time at all, the castle had been abuzz with speculation. By “the king of Lanzenave,” had Lady Georgine meant King Gervasio or his predecessor, King Chiaffredo? Had the meeting occurred when the Zent visited the villa or when the Zent and the king exchanged greetings? There had also been the chance that someone either of the kings had gotten along with inside the villa had since become the Sovereign knight commander. All sorts of theories had been thrown around, but even in the uproar, everyone had agreed on one thing: we had to make contact with them.

Naturally, we hadn’t been able to send King Gervasio to Ahrensbach; if something happened to him, Lanzenave wouldn’t have anyone to take his place. Someone else would need to open the negotiations, we had decided—someone who could secure the necessary details from Lady Georgine or this Sovereign knight commander, who could at least lay the groundwork for the reopening of the villa, and who could obtain and trade for as many feystones as possible in preparation for the worst-case scenario.

There had been an explosive debate over who to send—but out of all the candidates, I had secured the position.

“If our plan goes well, Lanzenave will change forever,” I said.

Giordano nodded. Outside the window, we could see Lanzenave ships approaching the port—a good sign, if ever one existed. I was barely able to contain my rising excitement as I awaited our arrival at the Lanzenave Estate.

“Oh, Lady Alstede,” I said. “I did not expect to see you here already.”

“Since we have guests, I thought it best to arrive early. A messenger came just a moment ago regarding the ships. Their passengers should be here soon, I imagine?”

I could not see Lady Detlinde anywhere, which meant she must have hurried into the estate upon her arrival. I was welcomed instead by her elder sister,

Lady Alstede—the person who had *actually* dyed Ahrensbach’s foundation. The Zent had not granted her his recognition, but she was still the duchy’s de facto aub.

Lady Alstede was an archnoble in her early twenties. Her bright green eyes; blue, almost purple hair; and shapely features made her easily comparable to Lady Georgine, but her personality wasn’t similar at all. She was a quiet girl who rarely spoke and always seemed to have a close eye on the mood of those around her.

From what I could tell, Lady Alstede was being tossed every which way by her mother and younger sister. By her mother’s will, she had married an archnoble despite being the daughter of an aub, and for the sake of her mother and sister’s plan, she had now dyed Ahrensbach’s foundation—all while having a young daughter of her own.

“Lady Alstede, this cannot be easy for you...” I said. “I still remember your declaration about not wanting to be the aub.”

“Indeed. My thoughts on the matter have not changed, but that is not to say this situation does not benefit me.”

Lady Alstede’s husband, Lord Blasius, had once been an archducal family member striving to become an aub. During the civil war, however, he had been demoted to the rank of an archnoble because of his mother’s duchy of birth.

“I wish to restore Lord Blasius to his former rank,” she continued. “If everything happens as Mother has planned, it will even be possible to grant him Ahrensbach’s foundational magic. Not to mention, there is still time for us to start giving our daughter the education of an archduke candidate.”

The civil war really had nothing but bad results, huh? It’s not hard to see why Lady Detlinde curses the current Zent at every chance she gets.

“Lanzenave is facing its own hardships as a result of the villa being closed, right? I pray that this plan goes well and that your country receives the assistance it needs.”

As we continued our conversation, we made our way into the estate. Lady Detlinde’s attendant was preparing tea in the parlor, while Lord Blasius, Lady

Alstede's husband, was hanging around. They were treating what was meant to be the Lanzenave Estate as a second home. Giordano must have made the same observation, as he let out a sigh behind me. It wasn't uncommon for our people to be relegated to the back rooms when Lady Detlinde came to visit.

"Alstede, has the door been opened yet?" Lady Detlinde asked. "I *did* send you the key, you know."

"No, not yet... I thought it best to wait until your arrival. Mother instructed as much, did she not?"

Lady Detlinde was considered to be Ahrensbach's aub, but Lady Alstede was the one actually in control of the duchy's foundation. To preserve the illusion, Lady Georgine had given Lady Detlinde firm orders to always be present for things that only the aub could perform, such as opening certain doors or the border gates.

"You always follow Mother's orders to the letter, Sister," Lady Detlinde complained. "I do not believe our guests will exercise much patience. Let us unlock it now before they arrive."

"Certainly. They might be in a hurry."

The Lanzenave Estate had a teleportation circle that was used to send princesses to the Adalgisa villa and welcome back kings. Only the aub could open the door on Ahrensbach's side.

It isn't hard to guess that the previous Aub Ahrensbach was assassinated to allow for open travel between Ahrensbach and the villa.

I very much doubted it was the *only* reason—Lady Georgine always had several, no matter what she did—but it was guaranteed to be one of them.

And so Lady Georgine had assassinated the previous aub and gotten Lady Alstede to redye the foundation, allowing us to open the door to the teleportation room at our leisure. Or it should have been that simple, but at the very last moment, during the Archduke Conference, it had been decided that the villa would go to a girl whom the Zent was adopting. The news could only be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to obliterate Lanzenave's hopes of the villa ever being reopened to accommodate new princesses.

Since the announcement, cleaners, remodelers, and craftsmen bringing new furniture had started frequenting the villa. At times, even members of the royal family had visited to check on their progress. This had made the teleporter practically unusable, which hadn't actually done much to impede Lady Georgine's plans, but it *had* caused problems for her coconspirator, who was said to have agonized over such a grave miscalculation.

Only now had the preparations finally been completed and the villa emptied of craftspeople, allowing the teleporter to be used without restraint. We had complete control over it and the villa until the next Archduke Conference, when its new owner would arrive.

But will this plan truly work?

I had told Giordano on our way here that we had no way of knowing whether things would go well, but I was wishing for Lady Georgine's success more than anyone.

"I shall open it, then," Lady Alstede said. She slotted her key into place, and in the blink of an eye, a magic circle made from yellow light appeared on the door.

It took me all the willpower I could muster not to cry out. Because of my time with Lady Detlinde, I considered myself more knowledgeable about magic than most others from Lanzenave, but I'd never seen anything like this. It was surprising enough that the magic circle had appeared out of nowhere, but then the door began to open on its own. As I tried to swallow my shock, the nobles around me looked entirely stone-faced. This level of magic was commonplace to them.

Beyond the door was a pure-white room. There was nothing of note inside except the magic circle drawn on the floor.

"That is the teleporter," Lady Detlinde explained, brimming with pride. "It will require mana here and on the other side, but it can transport people and goods." In the meantime, one of her attendants sent a letter explaining that we were ready on our end of the teleporter.

Lady Alstede went behind a pillar and did something I couldn't quite see. Then there came a bright, momentary flash from the teleporter.

On the other side... there are schtappes.

I took an unconscious step forward, as if seduced by the sudden flash. I wanted one. I wanted my own schtappe. If only I could obtain one, I would be able to secure power on my own. I wouldn't need to wait for my little sister's child.

I took another step, and the magic circle flashed again, this time for a little while longer. It spewed a fiery mix of black and golden light, shocking me to my senses and causing me to take a step back.

"Oh, they really were waiting after all. Welcome to Ahrensbach."

The light faded to reveal Lord Raublut, the Sovereign knight commander, standing atop the teleporter. I gasped at how suddenly he had appeared; for all its technological advancements, Lanzenave had nothing that could compare to large-scale magic.

"Lord Raublut, our other guests are due to arrive soon," Lady Detlinde said. "We received word that their ships have reached the port."

The knight commander cast his eyes down, allowing a slight smile to grace his mouth. "Aah... At last, I shall reunite with my lord. It has taken so... so long."

I remember him saying what a blunder it was that preparations for the villa would prevent them from using the teleporter.

We had meant to perform final checks during the summer funeral and then execute our plan in autumn, but work on the villa had delayed us until now. The man before us had found that more torturous than anyone.

"The fact you were waiting means your preparations are also complete, I assume?" Lady Detlinde asked. "You have the means by which to make me Zent."

Lord Raublut looked across all those gathered, then nodded at me and the others from Lanzenave. "Everything is going according to plan. Our hopes will soon be fulfilled." There was something about his deep, weighty voice that made me want to believe it unconditionally. I could actually feel my chest heating up with anticipation.

Will my hopes and dreams be fulfilled at last...?

“Aah, Raublut. It has been so long...” King Gervasio said, entering the estate after having arrived at the port.

The Sovereign knight commander knelt before the king of Lanzenave—a sight so bizarre that I couldn’t look away—and then replied, “I welcome you, my one and only lord. I cannot apologize enough for failing to carry out your final order and allowing harm to come to Lady Valamarlene.”

“Let it weigh on your mind no longer. The fate that befell her was regrettable, but you had no power to prevent it. Such is the law of this land, which you have been made to endure for much too long. Let your burden finally be lifted.”

Who’s Valamarlene?

I didn’t recognize the name, but if she was a mutual acquaintance, she had to be someone from the Adalgisa villa. Upon my arrival in Ahrensbach, I’d discovered that Lord Raublut had served as one of the villa’s guard knights while our own King Gervasio was living there. He was the very reason King Gervasio had come this far.

“Our actions here will ultimately be for the greater good. Raublut, if you would take me there, it is time to visit our old villa.”

“At once, my lord.”

Afterword

Hello again, it's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Volume 7*.

This volume's prologue was focused on Ferdinand. It can be considered a rewrite of the "Foreign Toys and Sweets" chapter from the web novel, so it might be fun to compare the two! Autumn ended, and the deliveries Rozemyne sent before leaving for the Royal Academy arrived. Ferdinand contemplated many things while checking over the ingredients she sent him and reading her letter.

The main story began with some winter preparations. Rozemyne was busy enough getting ready for her return to the Royal Academy, but preparations also needed to be made for Dirk and Bertram, who were leaving the orphanage to be baptized as nobles. Gretia made a few harsh but true observations, and it became clear that Rozemyne likewise needed to rethink her words and actions.

I was struck with a sense of emptiness when writing about the fellowship gathering. Hannelore was the lone greeter for Dunkelfelger, while Ahrensbach had only Martina.

Rozemyne's adult retainers stayed at the Royal Academy to help carry out not just one but *three* Dedication Rituals, though they only made it through the first before Rozemyne disappeared. My heart was racing as I wrote where she was going. I was like, "Gramps, Anwachs, she's all yours now!"

During her unexpected absence, Rozemyne endured a very sudden growth spurt and obtained an incomplete Book of Mestionora. Though she initially bemoaned these developments, they allowed her to realize what Georgine was planning. She began forming countermeasures... and then suddenly saw a vision of Ferdinand. It was the same phenomenon that occurred when Lutz saw Myne in danger during the trombe hunt way back in Part 2.

This volume's epilogue was written from Letizia's perspective. It explains how Ferdinand ended up in his current situation through the eyes of someone who

was directly involved. This was a rewrite of another web novel chapter, “The End of Peace.” Given her position, Letizia was never allowed to live as a normal child. She was exploited by those around her at every turn. I only hope she can still be saved...

The first original short story was from Charlotte’s perspective. It was basically a digest of what happened in the Royal Academy during Rozemyne’s absence. I hope that Hartmut’s and Brunhilde’s accomplishments, Charlotte’s hard work, and the general state of the dormitory were all made clear.

The second short story was written from Leonzio’s perspective. It focused on his objectives and provided a glimpse behind the Lanzenave curtain. It was my first time writing from Lanzenave’s viewpoint, which made it fairly enjoyable.

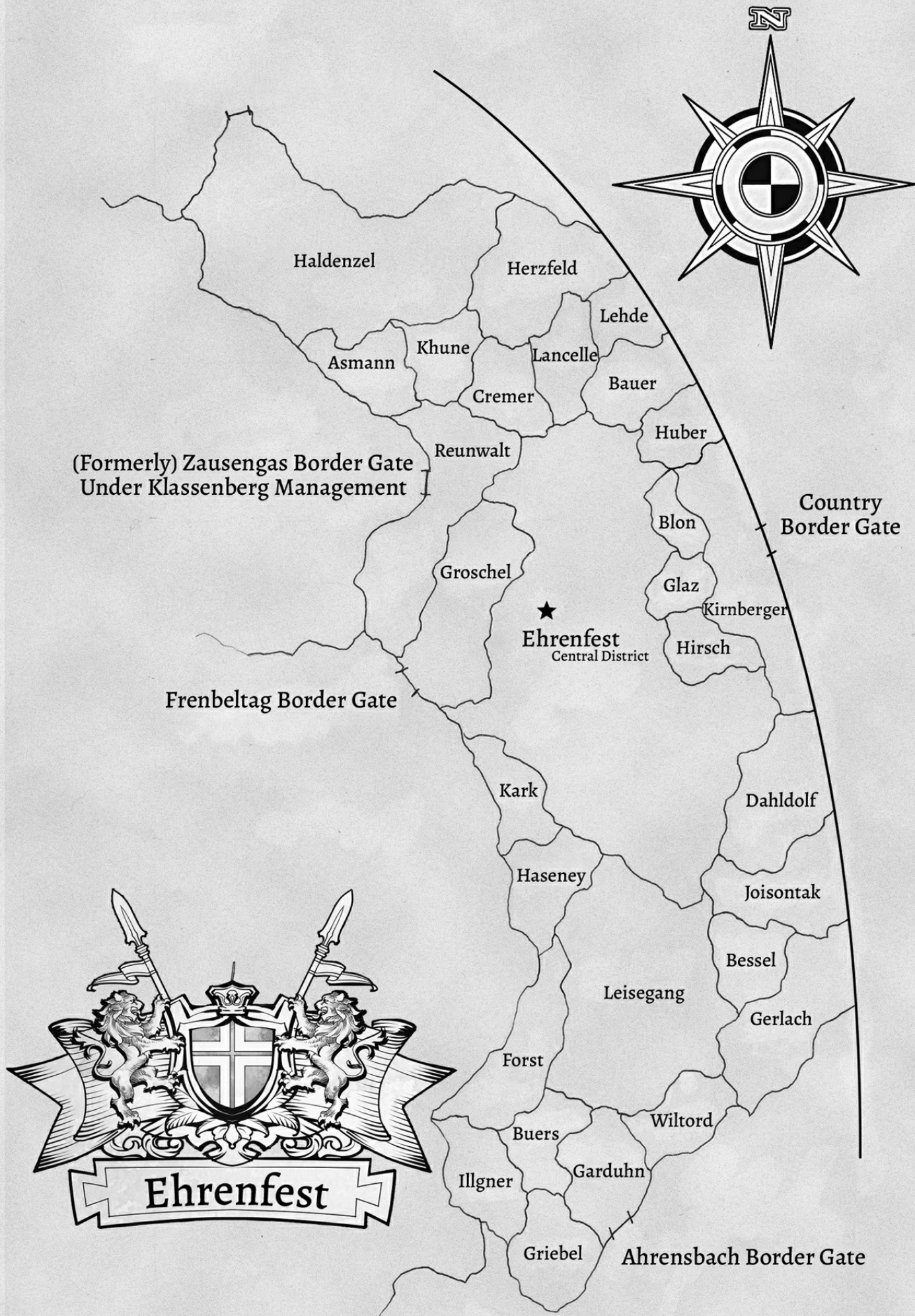
Newly designed for this volume were Erwaermen and Aub Dunkelfelger. The former came out exactly as I imagined: pure white, long-haired, and draped in heavy-looking clothes. Quite the appearance, if you ask me! The latter was made to embody the kind of man who could charge into battle at a moment’s notice. You can just tell, right? Let him out of your sight for a second and he’ll be rushing this way or that with a weapon in hand. At the same time, I think he comes across as someone who’s both strong and reliable.

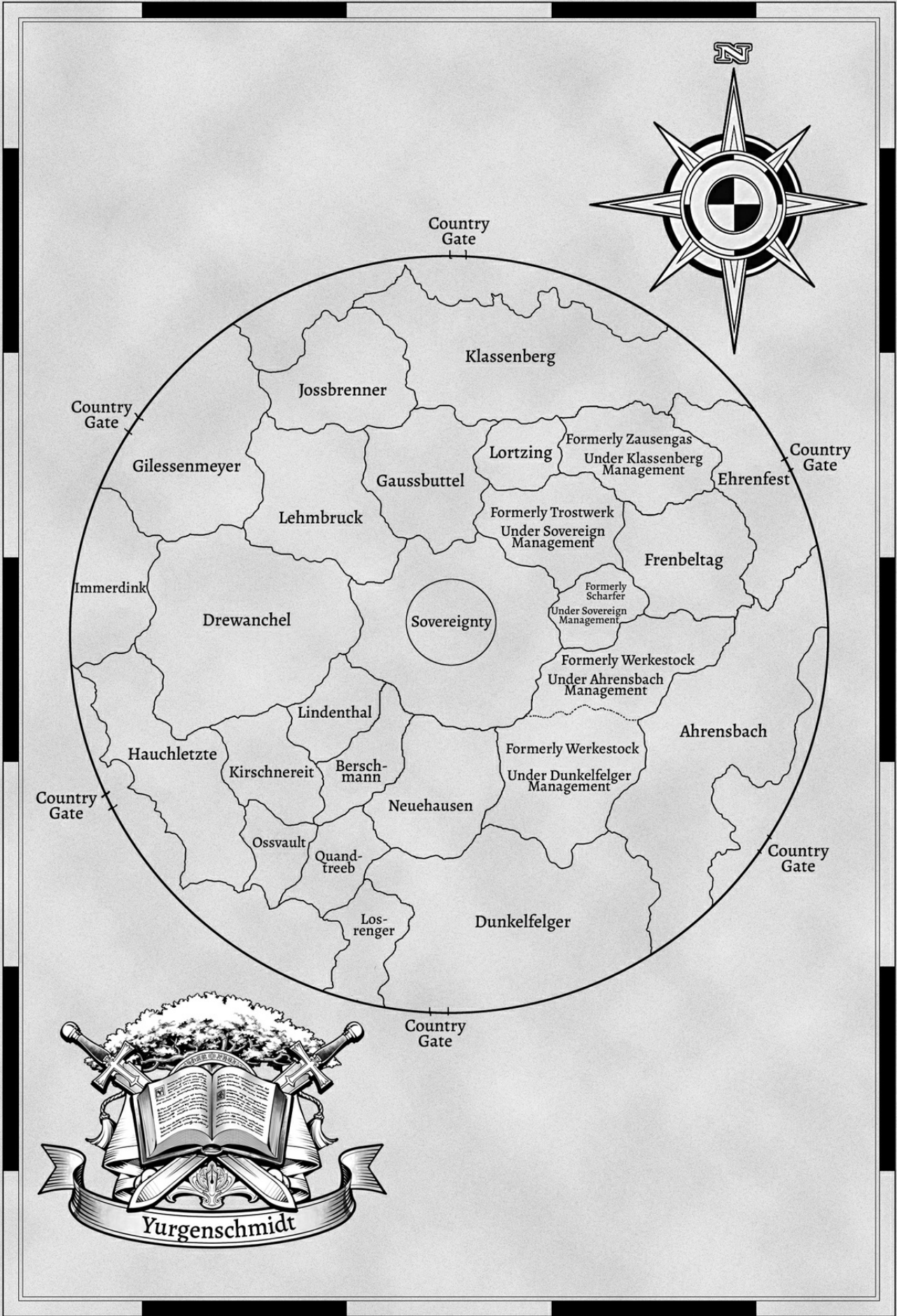
This volume’s cover art shows Rozemyne before and after she revisited the Garden of Beginnings. The scenery behind them changes too. There’s the young Rozemyne, excited about the imaginary library she’s discovered, and the grown-up Rozemyne, reading the Book of Mestionora in the Farthest Hall. They’re wearing the same clothes, so you can see how she’s grown at just a glance.

The color illustration is based on Rozemyne’s vision. Leonzio and Detlinde successfully spring their trap. Letizia falls into despair. The blood drains from Eckhart’s and Justus’s faces. I was very adamant about having a color illustration for such a crucial scene, believing in my heart that it was what the readers wanted. Shiina-sama—thank you.

And finally, my utmost thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 5 Volume 8.

September 2021, Miya Kazuki





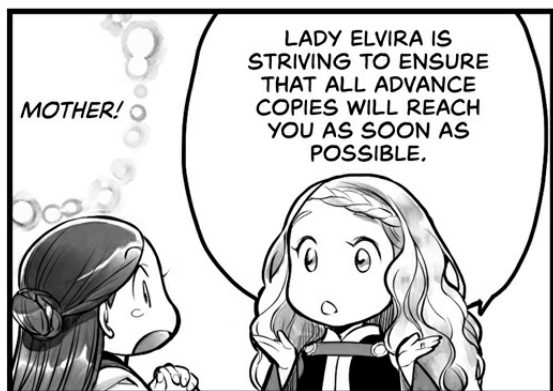
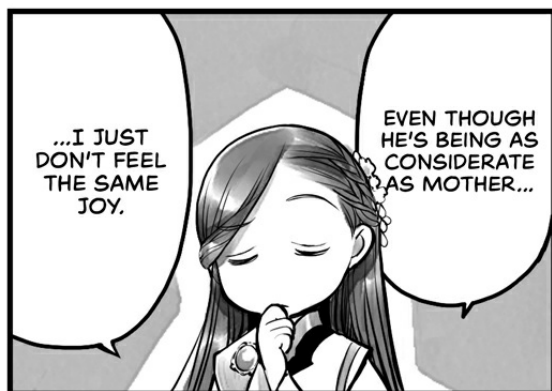
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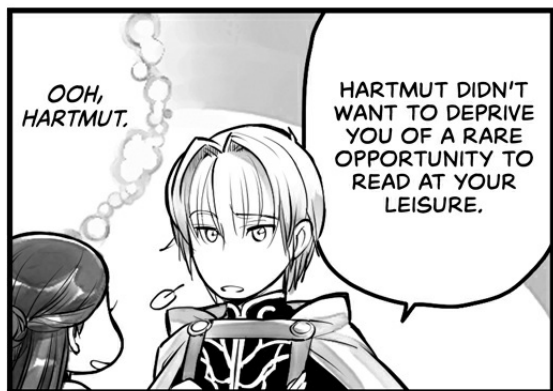
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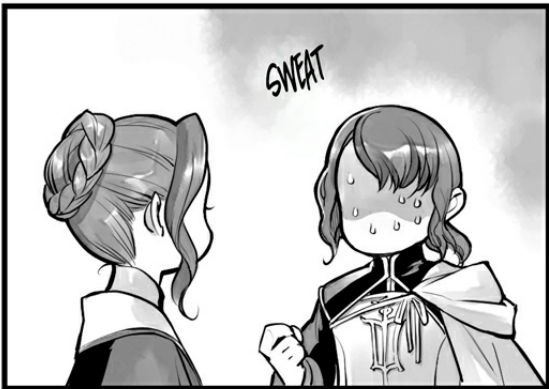
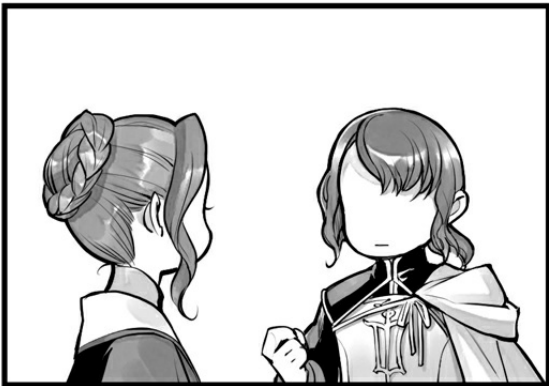
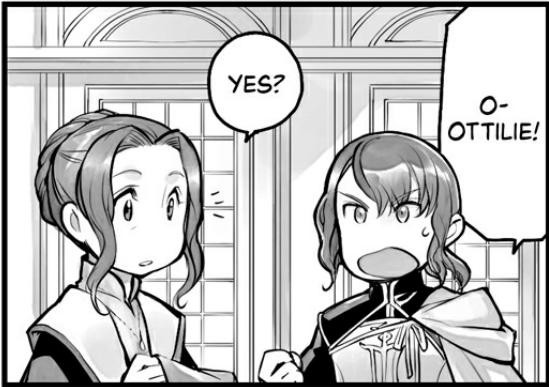
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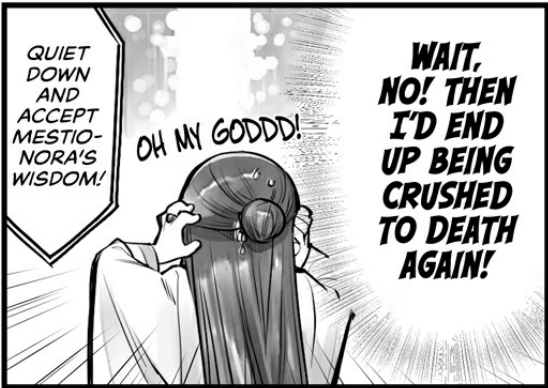
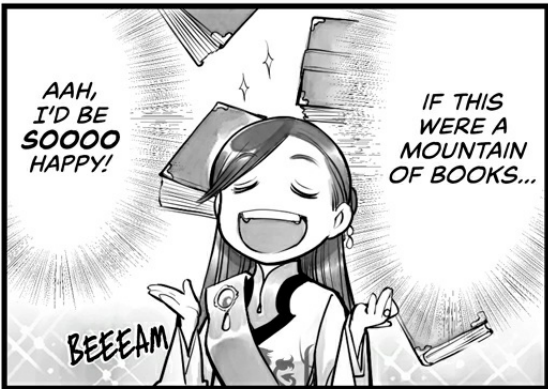
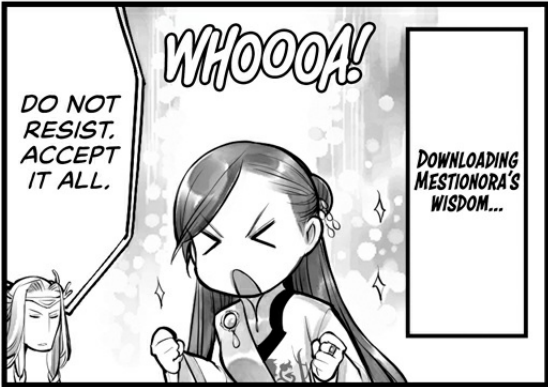
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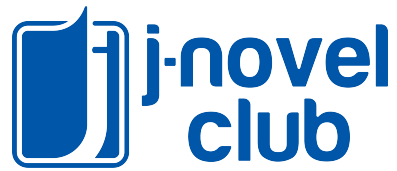


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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess Volume 7

by Miya Kazuki

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